

The Impact and Challenges of Asian Christianity in a Pluralistic Setting: A Biblical Approach to Changing the Situation

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Abstract

The identity and integrity of churches in Asia are at stake by the current so-called missionary trends. The fight within Christianity over three theological positions, namely exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist, have not only resulted in divisions within Christianity but doctrines of salvation and uniqueness of Christ are also under attack. Furthermore, in this piece the researcher has contested that some of the currently developed theologies in Asia (India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) in the postcolonial era have numerous challenges within churches and outside. Also, the borrowed agendas of the West in some regions of South Asia have still colonial clutches upon them. Also, many academics in the West and Asia are tended to focus on their own philosophical insights for the sake of building good relations with other faiths—forgetting doctrinal differences. As a result, the dichotomy between academic and congregational theology has serious consequences on Christianity today. Moreover, the whole study concluded that at present some churches have misconstrued the mission and faith of early Church, therefore easy-breezy strategies are developed in this phenomenon. It is also argued that theologies developed in this diverse location are losing their identity and integrity as Church. Therefore, in the light of these challenges, this study has re-examined the model of Christ and proposed a ‘Christo-Centric Praxis’ approach to identify the true identity of the Church, restoring the primacy of the Bible, demonstrating the uniqueness and universality of Christ.

Keywords: Asia, Bible, Christ, Church, Identity, Doctrines, Mission, Pluralistic, Postcolonial

Introduction

Christianity in the Asian context has a wide range of religious and philosophical beliefs. Every religion in this context has its own rituals, which have been practiced for centuries. Thus, on the first hand, where people profess their own faith and practices, they do believe that salvation exists within their own religious circles. Aside from the discussion, this diversity has a long-standing hatred with Christianity because of the past influence of some European missionaries' involvement in this context, who for the sake of building Christendom imposed such Christianity in Asia. Moreover, there is a long list of challenges that are not easy at all to handle in this article. A few of them are discussed to solve it from the biblical perspective by recalling the model of Christ. Although, in Asia and the West, theologians are doing hard to respond to the current situation and its posed challenges to Christianity by using different approaches. However, observing the approaches of different scholars in this perspective it is not the intention of this piece to offer easy-breezy ways to overcome the present situation, but rather the attempt is to offer the model of Christ to change the present condition.

Therefore, in the light of the present challenges, the first attempt to write this article is to pose various questions: is there a way for Asian Christians to overcome these challenges? If so, how credible is it in dealing with such issues? The second is to demonstrate the significance of Christ by responding to the various challenges worldwide within Christianity. It is also an attempt to propose a strategy that would serve as a model to engage with this pluralistic world, to demonstrate the identity and integrity of the Church.

CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA (Over the Past Few Centuries)

Christianity in Asia is as old as Christianity itself. Though there are numerous persons who believe that Apostle Thomas traveled to Kerela, such as Gruden Lowner, who claims that Christianity arrived in Kerala through St. Thomas around 52 C.E.¹ Like Lowner, Richard Hayes also confirms in this way, Christianity in the sub-continent of India came 2000 years ago, and this is according to Eusebius record, the Apostles Thomas and Bartholomew were assigned to Parthia (modern Iran) and India. So, this was through Thomas' effort that Christianity reached the farthest parts of the seas.² However, Dr. Micheal Nazir-Ali informs that before Thomas' journey to India, Christianity came into Taxila and this is according to the archeological records.³ Like Nazir-Ali, Felix Wilfred also states that St. Thomas came in the northern part of the subcontinent, a part of Pakistan, and through his preaching King Gondulphares accepted Christianity.⁴ Though there are several thoughts on Thomas' journey in Asia, nonetheless the intention of this paper is not to argue on Thomas' journey. Rather the purpose is to change the position of Asian Christianity before other faiths by restoring the current trends to the model of Christ.

It is worth noting that, in this discourse, the arrival of missionaries in Asia was initially met with astonishment because Asian people of many faiths were different from the

¹ Gruden Lowner, *Christian Art and Architecture in Asia*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (198 Madison Avenue, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014),458.

² Richard Hayes, *'The Formation of the Christian Church' An Alternate Biblical History*, (U.S.A: Lulu.com,2018), 44.

³ Michael Nazir-Ali, Articles, *The Contribution of Christians to building Pakistan*, (13 August 2018), <https://michaelnazirali.com/articles/app/month/08-2018/title/the-contribution-of-christians-to-building-pakistan> (Dec, 2021).

⁴ Felix Wilfred, *South Asian Christianity in Context*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (198 Madison Avenue, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014),31.

European culture. Although these missionaries came with a purpose to evangelize them, however upon their arrival they found the Asian people totally different in a sense—who had salvation and faith.⁵ Along with this, Ian Gilman and Joachim Klimkeit Hans inform that missionaries also brought superior technology in cannons and ships, as well as a strong desire for wealth. Whereby, later on, this image changed to European superiority, fueled by technological and naval achievements.⁶ Wai Ching Angela Wong adds, despite conflicting positions back in their home countries these missionaries brought ideological challenges in the form of scientific worldviews of the European Enlightenment, humanistic critiques of religion, racial theories of European superiority, and triumphalistic Gospel teachings of Christianity.⁷ Furthermore, the missionaries' role to grab the lands spoiled the image of Christianity. According to South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, who said that missionaries in Africa grabbed Africans' lands and handed them the Bible.⁸ Similarly, missionaries in Asia were particularly interested in trade, an Indian Scholar, S. Wesley Ariarajah notes that the lucrative spice trade inspired the desire to colonize Asia.⁹ Apart from trade, John of Damascus played a significant role in the eighth century, which was fueled by the crusades and later

⁵ Attaullah Siddique, *Muslims perceptions of Asian Christianity: Christianity in Asia*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), Felix Wilfred (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (198 Madison Avenue, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 381.

⁶ Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia Before 1500*, (270 Madison Ave, NY: Taylor & Francis Group), 1999, 315.

⁷ Wai Ching Angela Wong, *Modernity and Change of Values: Asian Christian Negotiations and Resistance*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook Of Christianity In Asia*, (198 Madison Avenue, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 202.

⁸ Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango, *How Africa Developed Europe: Deconstructing the His-story of Africa, Excavating Untold Truth and What Ought to Be Done and Known*, (Mankon, Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing CIG, 2018), 52.

⁹ S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Changing Paradigms of Asian Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, (198 Madison Avenue, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 351.

colonialism.¹⁰ Moreover, in the late eighteenth century the arrival of William Carey (1761-1834), one of the famous Baptist missionaries, in the Indian subcontinent attacked Asian religiosity by considering Hindus a Satanic religion.¹¹ (From the preceding discussion, it is not the intention of this paper to postulate missionaries in a negative sense but rather the whole point is to demonstrate the impact of missionaries to show the overall phenomenon). While the situation was different when the early Church Fathers came to this continent, they developed non-aggressive attitudes with other faiths to witness Christ.¹² It is worth noting that, in the beginning, Christianity had no problems with other religions, even though they lived side by side. Paul's encounter with Athens is important to understand the situation. Paul does not disregard Athens's religiosity in a negative connotation, but rather his approach was quite different from the missionaries. Timothy George confirms that Paul did not begin his speech by condemning the Athenians' false gods... Instead, he began by identifying what was lacking in their normative framework.¹³

Despite the historical records of early Christianity, Johnson and Gina A. Bellofetto inform that due to the misconstrued mission of missionaries, Christianity was forcefully imposed on other cultures by giving the impression that Christianity is a Western religion. As a result of this perception, Christians are now regarded as agents of the West in some Asian regions. In this respect, an Asian scholar, Moonjang Lee observes that in the non-Western world the influence of Western Christianity is still dominated though they are living in the post-Western

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Arun Jones, *Christianity in South Asia: Negotiating Pluralism*, Charles E. Farhadian, *Introducing World Christianity* (Ed.), First Edition, (Chichester, West Sussex, United Kingdom: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2012), 95.

¹² S. Wesley Ariarajah, *Changing Paradigms of Asian Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, 348.

¹³ Timothy George, *The Trinity and the Challenge of Islam*, Timothy George (Ed.), *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 120.

world.¹⁴ Furthermore, the building structures of Asian churches, as well as biblical interpretations (without contextualization), have highly misshaped Christianity in Asia, where Christianity has masqueraded as Western religion (more would be discussed in the subsequent pages). Unfortunately, the present condition of Asian Christianity according to Peter C. Phan is, when it comes to spiritual and material well-being, though Christians in Asia have made a significant contribution to eradicating hatred and violence, however, the conflicts of civilization within religion are still there. Phan further claims that these conflicts cannot be resolved without religious harmony.¹⁵ Apart from religious conflicts, on the other hand, at present, Western imperialism in some Christians towards Christendom is still dominant that has ruined the face of Christianity in Asia.

To sum up the aforementioned challenges, these missionaries from the European world misrepresented the Christian mission and faith for the sake of planting Western Christianity, building Christendom without understanding the presence of other religions—denouncing them as evil. As a result, the present conflicts and disunity of Asian Christianity with others faiths have multiple challenges in this perspective.

Missionaries' Trends and its Consequences on Asian Christianity

Despite these aforementioned facts, the important point is, all the missionaries did not come with this same intention. Also, this is not the aim to neglect the services of those missionaries who came to serve, Aruna Gnanadason indicates that several missionaries came in Asia who was enriched with Asian spiritual and philosophical thoughts, however, some mistreated

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peter C. Phan, *Christianities in Asia*, (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 5.

other faiths and considered them superstitious and pagan.¹⁶ As a result, Asia's socio-cultural and religious landscapes were transformed from an architectural, theological, and doxological standpoint, and it became a foreign religion.¹⁷ Furthermore, the divide between academic and congregational theology is another important factor that has serious consequences for Christianity today.¹⁸ The three theological positions, exclusivism (Karl Barth developed this approach), inclusivism (Karl Rahner developed this approach), and pluralism (John Hick proposed this approach) in the churches today exploit the biblical standards of witnessing Christ. Thus, the fight of churches to condemn one another has distorted Christianity around the world. Though, today the status of world Christianity the center of gravity has shifted from Global North to Global South which is one of the brilliant works in this context.¹⁹ However, in Asia to overcome such a situation where the Church should present the universality and uniqueness of Christ did not fulfill its objective so far to witness Christ. In this respect, Andrew Walls argues that though the new ways would emerge from this shift, however in the twentieth century the theologies produced in the Western context to respond to non-Western challenges did not achieve the purpose for local Christians.²⁰ Despite this fact, on the first hand, Western ready-made theologies in Asia that ignore the needs of local Christians remain prevalent in the Asian context. Unfortunately, local churches, on the other hand, are increasingly adopting these theologies without recognizing the consequences. Furthermore, the colonial legacy is still at its peak, as some Christian leaders

¹⁶ Aruna Gnanadason, *The Contributions of the Ecumenical Movement in Asia to World Ecumenism*, Felix Wilfred (Ed.), 140.

¹⁷ Attaullah Siddique, 379.

¹⁸ Johnson and Gina A. Bellofetto, *Upon Closer Examination: Status of World Christianity*, 114.

¹⁹ Moonjang Lee, *Theological Education as Embodiment of Jesus*, William R. Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, Janice A. McLean (Eds.), *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), n. pag.

²⁰ Ibid.

rely on the West not only for economic reasons but also to replicate the divide and rule policy in their institutions. Homi Bhabha called that behavior “a mimicry” and he argues that:

“The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is very profound and disturbing.”²¹

On the other side, where people are aware of such West-made policies, they have made their own strategies to grapple with such a situation (in the following pages these new trends are comprehensively discussed). Thus, in the light of the above-mentioned difficulties and challenges, the questions that need immediate response are, whether the current trends of some Asian theologians are capable to bring change in this situation? If they are how far are they credible to maintain Christian identity in this perspective? Are they according to meet the biblical standards of early Church mission? Lee points out that many Asian theologians now lean towards a theology of religions or interfaith/interreligious dialogue, buying into the ideas of religious pluralism and thereby jeopardizing Christian theology's identity and integrity.²² Regardless of Lee's clarification, these evolved methodologies in the Asian context require a thorough examination to determine whether these new trends are compatible with the model of Christ. Therefore, a critical analysis of these approaches would be conducted to develop a ‘Christo-Centric Praxis’ in order to bring change in this setting to maintain and demonstrate the identity of Christianity (in the next section, we will look at how other scholastic approaches have been used to address religious challenges around the world).

²¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 2014. Pg. 123.

²² Moonjang Lee, *Re-Configuration of Western Theology in Asia*, (Common Ground Journal v6 n2, 2009), 80.

Christianity in the Twentieth Century to Meet the Religious Challenges

The challenges raised in the previous pages are not new in this context. At the beginning of the twentieth century Edinburgh conference in 1910, also misunderstood the diversity of the Asian context by merely inviting 17 delegates from India, China, and Japan while a large number of delegates were from Britain and America.²³ Thus, after looking at the current problems the Catholic church decided to revise her approach towards other faiths. As a result, the Council of Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate*) took place at the end of the twentieth century that declared other religions are also saved. This was exactly the contrast of Catholics' previous statement wherein they believed 'there is no salvation outside the Church'. The Roman Catholics' theology was based on exclusivism that was grounded in the fact that the people outside of the church were doomed and damned. However, the Council of Vatican II has opened new horizons for Christianity in the secular world. It states that:

“The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She has sincere respect for those ways of acting and living, those moral and doctrinal teachings which may differ in many respects from what she holds and teaches, but which nonetheless often reflect the brightness of that Truth which is the light of all men.”²⁴

This document also declared that Muslims are highly respected by Catholics because they are descended from Abraham. Furthermore, Muslims believe Jesus is a prophet even though they do not believe He is God; however, they honor the virgin

²³ Johnson and Gina A. Bellofetto, *Upon Closer Examination: Status of World Christianity*, 114.

²⁴ VATICAN II: *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite (Eds.), *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, (185 Banbury Road Oxford OX2 7AR, England: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 40.

mother Mary. In terms of doctrine, they also believe in prayers, fasting, and final judgment.²⁵ In other words, this document encouraged Muslims to forget everything that has happened in the past between Catholic Christians and Muslims in order to work together to build peace and freedom with one another. Furthermore, this addressed Jews who are in the same line with Abraham, declaring that it remembers the roots of Christianity. The Church cannot, therefore, forget that it was through that person, with whom God in his ineffable mercy saw fit to establish the Old Covenant, that she herself has received the revelation of the Old Testament. The Catholic Church also recalls the apostles, the foundations and pillars of the Church, and very many of those first disciples who proclaimed the Gospel of Christ to the world were born of the Jewish people.²⁶ It went on to say that having the same beliefs as Jews and the Church will lead to the people of the Lord seeing and serving Him together in the end. The sacred council also wishes to share biblical sources in such a way that they can serve as a valuable source of theological education.²⁷ In other words, through this document the Catholic Church has invited other religions by acknowledging good things in them, forgetting what happened in the past to work in a new way together for peacebuilding and harmony in all the parts of the world. The World Council of Churches (WCC) accepted it after a decade or so as 'Guidelines on Dialogues'.²⁸ Though, at first, this document seems quite appealing that invites other people to forget the past fights with the other religions. However, it is important to note here, this document provided much freedom to the people to develop theologies by rejecting the traditional structure of the Church. Consequently, various theologies took place—the reason behind these emerging theologies was based on the human perspective; fighting for their rights to get positions, etc. Black liberation theology is one of the examples

²⁵ Ibid., 41.

²⁶ Ibid., 41-42.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

of it, being oppressed and poor in this context, black Africans in America are fighting for their rights. Paul Enn informs that this movement is borrowed from the philosophical theses of Immanuel Kant who prioritized human rights neglecting the divine role.²⁹ Enn further argues that Roman Catholics in Latin America also followed the liberation approach by following the II Vatican that turned many priests to liberationists.³⁰ David J. Bosch states in this respect:

“The Vatican document *Nostra Aetate* has a special significance for the theology of mission, in that it broaches a new interpretation of non-Christian religions...In these publications the non-Christian religions are described alternately as ‘ordinary ways of salvation’, anonymous Christianity’, or ‘the latent Church’...Theological developments during and since Vatican II in many respects led to a crisis in the Roman Catholic missionary enterprise. Questions were being asked. If the Church is involved in mission everywhere, why do missionaries still have to go to distant, foreign countries? If non-Christian religions also provide ways of salvation, why do we have to convert their adherents? If Protestants are still our ‘brethren in Christ’ why do we still have to compete with them on the mission field?”³¹

Furthermore, the three theological positions; exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism are the outcomes of it that have separated churches. Douglas Priest argues that churches have separated themselves into camps that labeled one another

²⁹ Paul. P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Moody Publishers, 2008), 637.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 638.

³¹ David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World : The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*,(Atlanta, George: John Knox Press, 1980), 185.

either ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal.’³² He further notes that liberals are engaged in social actions while conservatives are focused on evangelism, ignoring and offending each other.³³ An Indian theologian, Stanley J. Samartha who maintains an inclusivist’s position argues in this way:

“Exclusiveness puts fences around the Mystery. It creates dichotomies between the divines and the human, between humanity and nature, and between religious communities ...In moving beyond exclusiveness and inclusiveness, Christians must come to a clearer grasp of the uniqueness of Jesus. The distinctiveness of Jesus Christ does not lie in claiming that “Jesus Christ is God.” This amounts to saying that Jesus Christ is the tribal god of Christians over against the gods of other people. Elevating Jesus to the status of God or limiting Christ to Jesus of Nazareth are both temptations to be avoided.”³⁴

Thus, Samartha believes that rather than proclaiming that Christ is the God of all people, the significance of Christ in this pluralistic world should be ‘as a tribal god’ rather than ‘God of all people’.

Unlike inclusivists, pluralists believe that no religion can claim superiority over others. Christ may be a savior within Christianity, but He cannot be preached as the only savior among all religions. Wilfred Cantwell Smith (who spent most of

³² Douglas D. Priest, *Preach the Gospel or Feed the Hungry*, Douglas D. Priest, Stephen E. Burris (Eds.), *River of God: An Introduction to World Mission*, (Eugene, Oregon: WipfandStock, 2012), 16.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Stanley J. Samartha, *The Cross and the Rainbow*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eds.), *Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 77,79.

his time in South Asia) maintains the pluralist position, declaring that:

“For Christians to think that Christianity is true, or final, or salvific, is a form of idolatry. For Christians to imagine that God has constructed Christianity, or the Church, or the like rather than that He/She/It has inspired us to construct it, as He/She/It has inspired Muslims to construct what the world knows as Islam, or Hindus what is miscalled Hinduism...that is idolatry... Exclusivists claims for one’s own is idolatry in the pejorative.”³⁵

Unlike Samartha, Smith believes Christianity is true or he has only salvific will is equal to idolatry. Moreover, pluralists believe that all religions are equal and there is no absolute truth, but rather truths. These pluralists called this turn ‘paradigm shift’ and recognize that this model is different from the previous approach of what has been done in the Church.³⁶

Above all(ironically), exclusivists’ understanding of Christ’s work on the Cross is another major challenge in this context. Alister E. McGrath observes that the term ‘exclusivism’ is abandoned nowadays because it is considered polemical thus, this approach is named particularism.³⁷ Though particularism/exclusivism (‘particularism or exclusivism’ this is not the issue of this paper) rightly believes that Christ’s salvific will has paid off once and for all, however, on the first hand, this makes someone dogmatic and rigid in a sense when he/she believe that the saved are more gracious before God

³⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Idolatry*, John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eds.), *Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, 59-60.

³⁶ See John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (Eds.), *Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1987), vii.

³⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity: An Introduction*, 2nd Edition, (MA, U.S.A: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 165.

than the unbelievers. In this respect, this approach becomes more dangerous than inclusivism and pluralism as it declares, other faiths are unrighteous and aliens before God, while Christians are holy in the sight of God. In other words, the former approach declares that God has no special purpose for other faiths but rather they are created for eternal punishment and hell. To condemn such dogmatic teachings of this former belief, Ariarajah argues that the only way to recover from such a situation where colonial legacy has shaped disputes with other faiths, reformulation, and re-imagination is urgently required towards such Christian doctrines in the postcolonial setting as a solution of this flaw.³⁸

The challenges do not end here; in fact, the situation has worsened to the point where reading the Bible is no longer central (the following section will examine other ways of resolving this unsettled context). Thus, these new trends in Asian scholarship have tended to focus on a new way of doing mission that is completely contradictory to congregational teachings—ignoring the doctrinal differences and faith clashes of Christianity with other faiths—building ‘good neighborhood policy’ with other faiths³⁹ for the sake of peace and harmony in the world. Thus, this context does not demand simply to deconstruct the so-called "conservative, inclusivist, and pluralist" labels, rather, to re-orientate a model of Christ that transforms the hearts of such perplexity to maintain the identity and integrity of the church in Asia.

³⁸ Ibid., 363-364.

³⁹ For a thorough study of this approach, see Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 2002.

New Horizons of Christianity in Asia Contrary to the Bible

Besides these challenges, there are several other scholars in this field who deserve to be mentioned; however, due to space and time constraints, only a few will be mentioned that have proposed new approaches to develop religious harmony in this perspective. R.S. Sugirtharajah, (Sri Lankan theologian, a biblical hermeneuticist) argues that “Different reading practices open up different ways of looking at the text.”⁴⁰ He notes that the earlier comparative approach of theologians to study the Bible towards religions was aggressive, judgmental, condescending. Thus, his stance is that the traditional model points out the weakness of other religions by superiotizing the Christian God.⁴¹ In this respect, Sugirtharajah presents models of Edward Wadie Said’s (a cultural critic, whose mostly literature was based on Western imperialism) ‘Contrapuntal Reading’ and ‘Late Style’. The first approach makes connections of all the sacred texts to unveil the text [Bible] to find out the obscured meaning of the text. Said’s assertion, in other words, is the Bible gains meaning from other texts and enhances the readers’ capability to fill the gaps without losing the originality of the text. In this strategy the two characters: Buddha and Christ are taken and their birth narratives are compared to find out what is missing in historical and cultural perspectives to discover the obscured meaning of each other birth. In the ‘Late Style’, Said believed that with time the mind of the artist gets changed. He took the cases of Paul and John and claimed that Paul changed his rebellious attitudes towards harmoniousness. The same Paul who declared we have to fight with the ruling authority has a calmness. On the other hand, John’s ‘Late Style’ is totally different from Paul’s. John's early literature is apolitical in tone in contrast to the book of Revelation. In other words, Said claimed the notion of ‘love’ in the Gospel of John is

⁴⁰ R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice*, (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 142.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

replaced with vengeance and violence in the book of revelation. The other model (this belongs to Sugirtharajah) is the rhetoric representation of the parable of a rich man and poor Lazarus in which Sugirtharajah questions the silence of Lazarus. He argues that in the Bible the poor are being misrepresented, while the rich and the dominant classes are shown in the positive perspectives. He argues that understanding this type of narrative unsettles the postcolonial context, which has no concern for Lazarus. Thus, Sugirtharajah concludes that today Lazarus cannot survive on mere crumbs he demands a bigger share. In the Asiatic context, Sugirtharajah emphasizes that though the Gospel of Luke emphasizes that Lazarus was surviving on crumbs but, this narrative does not make any sense today.⁴² Thus, Sugirtharajah declares that:

“Postcolonialism regards the Bible as a contested and ambiguous book. Postcolonial biblical criticism questions the potential of the Bible to preserve and protect the dominant and also in the process unsettles its position as a primary source for the dominant to strengthen their grip.”⁴³

The above approaches invite readers to replace the original message of the Bible and this new shift denounces the teachings of the Bible to read it in a postcolonial perspective; which opposes the validity of the Bible’s message for today’s world.

Evangelicals’ Response to Critics and the Primacy of the Bible

From the situation above, one can easily recognize the challenges towards exclusivists, inclusivists, pluralists’ positions, and criticism that questions the primacy of the Bible. Thus, to respond to exclusivists in this regard, it is important

⁴² Ibid., 143-171.

⁴³ Ibid., 172.

to emphasize the claim of exclusivism that Christianity is a religion of salvation, however, it is noteworthy to note according to John Stott:

“It is no exaggeration to say that Christianity is a religion of Salvation...as God of the Bible is the God of salvation...Salvation not only defines the particularity and uniqueness of the biblical God but even according to the Bible, defines the very identity of God.”⁴⁴

So, the narrow scope of exclusivists who are restrictive and stiff postulate people of other faiths not acceptable before God that creates no room to share Christ with them. Furthermore, this kind of misconstrued mission makes monopoly over Christianity. Like Stott, Timothy C. Tennent insightfully argues that:

“The problem with exclusivism arises when, in a desire to protect the centrality of these truths, it overextends itself into several potential errors.”⁴⁵

Tennent further highlights three major elements that are the obstacles in the dialogues: firstly, it fails to fully appreciate God’s activity, secondly, this narrow scope takes a defensive position of not engaging in question and it stops to listening to the questions of those who are not Christians. Thirdly, exclusivists have frequently and unnecessarily separated non-Christian religions and their sacred texts from the rest of the culture. This has inadvertently formed a schism not only between general and special revelation but also between the

⁴⁴ John Stott, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 164.

⁴⁵ Timothy C. Tennent, *Towards Evangelical Theology*, Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, Timothy C. Tennent (Eds.), *Christian Encounter with other religions, Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues (Encountering Mission)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 295.

doctrines of creation and soteriology.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the inclusivist approach that denies the significance of Christ and the distinctiveness of Christianity in this world poses several challenges to the Church's identity and Christ's uniqueness. Thus, in this case, on the first hand, responding to inclusivists it is important to remember that:

“So, to the extent that we find any truth embedded in any other religious systems, we must attribute that to the general revelation of God. So, yes, Christ is there in the truth known through general revelation. But knowledge of some truth does not constitute salvation, and since other religions do not tell the story of what God has done to save the world through Jesus Christ, then, no, they cannot, therefore, be means of salvation. “Is Christ present in the non-Christian world?” (Meaning the world of other religions) would be: in general revelation, yes; but in salvation, no.”⁴⁷

Additionally, the biblical understanding to recognize Christian identity is quite important in this manner to challenge this approach as the Bible says: “If you declare with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Rom 10:9) Besides, pluralists who claim that there is nothing that makes Christ unique is quite challenging in a sense. In this case, the three major aspects, that make Christ significant in this pluralistic world are important to highlight:

“He is Lord. He is Savior, He is ours. For he is ‘our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.’ Historically speaking, these are allusions to his birth, death, and resurrection. Theologically speaking, they

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ John Stott, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, (Downers Grove IL, U.S.A: Inter Varsity Press, 2015), N.pag.

refer to the incarnation, the atonement and the risen Lord's gift of the Spirit."⁴⁸

Though the pluralists in the West and Asian circles are much more leaning towards the easiest approaches—to mutually agree at some points where everyone accepts and treats equally to one another without having any dispute with each other; which is not bad, however, the problem with this approach is, it makes Christ one among others and lost the universality and uniqueness of Christ. Thus, in this discourse, McGrath argues though each one of them assumes the other is incorrect, however, their approaches are leading them to their own exclusivist claims.⁴⁹

As far as the primacy of the Bible is concerned the Bible has always been an important text for Asians to wrestle with the challenges of the modern world. Even though it was written thousands of years ago, however, the implications of the Bible are still relevant in today's world. In this context, a fresh reading of the Bible to theologize our current challenges is more important than viewing it from a postcolonial perspective. Philip Jenkins argues in this manner that "Throughout [reading the Bible], we need to think communally rather than individually."⁵⁰ Unlike, Sugirtharajah, Jenkins offers a cross-cultural exercise of the text wherein the reader should understand the original message of the Bible. He proposes a method of reading the book of Ruth while imagining what it might mean in a hungry country threatened by war and social unrest. Also, the earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in the context of society deprived of the economic, social, and spiritual environment (Luke 4:17-18).⁵¹ Like Jenkins, John O'Keefe and Russell R. Reno argue in

⁴⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God's Word to Today's World*, (Downers Grove IL, U.S.A: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 315.

⁴⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, Sixth Edition, (MA, U.S.A: Wiley-Blackwell,2016), 417.

⁵⁰ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South*, (Oxford University Press :USA - OSO, 2006), 182.

⁵¹ Ibid.

a similar way “to think and through the scripture to have a sanctified vision”⁵². Thus, the Bible is the subject matter for resolving the tensions and conflicts of the present context.

Therefore, in the light of the above proceeding, on the first hand, this should be a priority to proclaim Christ alone, rather than propagating that salvation is through ‘the or a’ religion, as it becomes actually idolatry in a way because it offers salvation not believing in Jesus Christ but rather promotes religion. On the other hand, it is necessary to adopt the model of Jesus Christ in order to reestablish Christian mission and faith, and Bible is the only source that provides this model.

Theology of Religions: An Approach towards ‘Christo-Centric Praxis’

Before constructing a theology of religions towards other faiths and mission in the pluralistic world it is important to consider the statement of Alan Kreider who rightly observes Christianity in this manner:

“In my experience most people today view Christians not as advocates of something new and exciting but rather as blinkered defenders of views that are old, which have been tricked, and which have failed.”⁵³

Kreider further argues that the urgency in this regard is to evaluate your living in this pluralistic world that whether your rituals are powerful and alive enough so you can address the problems that your communities actually have?⁵⁴ He further emphasizes, evaluating your worship is based upon how it

⁵² John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible*, (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 116.

⁵³ Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, *Vox Evangelica*, Vol. XXIV, 1994, 30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

makes you feel, or on how it shapes your character as a community of faith and as individual Christians so that you resemble Jesus Christ?⁵⁵ According to Kreider, living within this diverse religious community should be about resembling Christ to address the world's challenges. The approach of this dialogical construction towards other faiths and its praxis is based on the model of Christ which He demonstrated in His earthly ministry interacting with this world. Jesus showed what it means to be the light of the world so that everyone shines exactly in the same way (as Christ shone amidst the darkness of this world) so that others could see the good works in us and praise our heavenly Father (Matthew 5: 16).

The first thing that one can observe is, Jesus Christ was open to listening to others, He never tended to focus on speaking a lot, but rather He always gave people the opportunity to speak and question Him. In other words, He did not take the exclusivist position; He never ever communicated in the monologue tone; a dogmatic way to interact but rather He opened Himself so that people could ask Him questions and give their reasons to Jesus (Matthew 19:16-22). Secondly, it is important here to note, Jesus never ever responded in a harsh manner to rebuke anyone in such a way that no one ever asked Him any question. Despite the disciples' poor understanding of Jesus' mission, Jesus 'trusted and invested' Himself so that His disciples would understand His teachings. (Matthew 16:15). If Jesus would have adopted the restricted and stiff methods of doing mission, He would not have got the chance to listen and reach to many. Moreover, in this discourse, Christ did not only remove the fears of the disciples but rather prayed and prepared them for the extension of the kingdom of God (Luke 8, 22:32; John 21). Unfortunately, missionaries in this context did not adopt Jesus' model to approach the world rather they postulated other faiths evil before God. Although Jewish people did not believe in Him, still Jesus declared that He has not come to judge the world, but rather to save it. (John 3:17).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Unfortunately, many missionaries 'became Jesus' for the people, while the fundamental necessity of 'giving Jesus' was overlooked. Consequently, preachers at the global and local spectrum have adopted the same strategy of 'being Jesus' rather than 'giving Jesus'. Unlike missionaries, Jesus, despite being God, did not consider equality with God, but rather became a servant and died a criminal death on the cross for the sake of all humanity (Philippians 2:5-8), thus both perspectives 'serving and offering' were part of Jesus' ministry. Thirdly, Jesus' model to interact was not only based upon being more open and listening rather 'positive and constructive. One of the weaknesses of some Christians today is, they get upset (they are more towards the negative approach) when they meet with other faiths. In this way, if Christ's way of dialogues with the Samaritan woman was based on negative thoughts (though the Jewish leaders were superseding Samaritans perceiving them wicked before God because of their past fight), He would not have constructed her thoughts. Thus, in this way, Jesus being 'positive and constructive' towards this woman provided her the opportunity to know Christ. Jesus spoke to her gently and humbly and consequently; this dialogical conversation changed the Samaritan woman's heart. Jesus' interaction pierced a woman's heart her weariness went after sharing problems with Him (John 4). Ray Sherman Anderson presents this story in this way:

"The Samaritan woman sought to engage Jesus in discussion over the issue of the Jews hatred of Samaritans, but Jesus spoke with a voice below the issues when he said, "Give me a drink."...Perhaps the voice which we speak to our own souls is the most strident and unforgiving. ⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Ray Sherman Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*, (Downers Grove IL, U.S.A: Inter Varsity Press, 2001), 216.

Unfortunately, our preaching approaches have shifted to teaching alone, while the praxis of those teachings has lost its significance. Thus, this current approach should be revised based upon the model of Jesus to change the current image of Christianity locally and globally. The 'Christo-Centric Praxis' to interact with other religions should be the model of living in this world. So that through humble conversation, by the positive and constructive attitude, according to the biblical approach of mission the world would know Christ rather than any superior, negative, and restricted postures. The third and last step would be being 'embodiment of Christ' as Christ laid down His life for the community by showing His everlasting love on the Cross, not for the Jews alone, but rather for all the people. The Christian community's praxis would be the same to transform the economic, socio-political, cultural, and religious situation by becoming a healing community remembering that 'this world belongs to our Lord'. And, it needs restoration to move towards a just world where the righteousness of God should prevail (2 Corinthians 5:21). In this respect, it is also important to remember in the early Church through the love of Christ, other faiths recognized the uniqueness of Christ and thus this distinctiveness of the Church changed the hearts of their persecutors. As

"[T]he love and obedience of Jesus establish new order, a new humanity. Through Jesus' suffering love and solidarity with a humanity that has become disordered, the structure of sin and social injustice is taken within the humanity of God and overcome"⁵⁷.

This new humanity in Asia recreated in the image of Christ would do exactly the same to restore the broken world.

Therefore, on the first hand, our duty should be 'exclusive' in a sense to demonstrate the message of the Cross. On the other

⁵⁷ Ibid, 314.

hand, we should be 'inclusive' in a sense to be dogmatic and firm in our beliefs presenting the uniqueness of Christ. Moreover, we should be 'pluralists' in a sense of being rigid in this diversity whereby the salvation of Christ would not be minimized—the salvific will of Christ neither be neglected nor compromised.

In the light of the presented model, the Church at global and local spectrum being one body of Christ at any place must be a true reflection of Christ. The 'Christo-Centric Praxis' must be preached and demonstrated to bring people to the feet of Christ so that all would see the reconciliation of God with this world.

Conclusion

The prior discussion serves as a framework to address the disagreements that exist within Christianity to resolve the religious conflicts. This could be seen, on the first hand, in terms of criticizing one another in this diverse phenomenon. On the other hand, various theologians in South Asia have adopted some anti-colonial perspectives that have fueled this situation by misperceiving the primacy of the Bible in order to remove the aspects of colonial legacy. Along with this, it has been argued that one of the most damaging issues in Asian church circles has been the Western influence of Christianity, which has been one of the major difficulties portraying different Christianity to Asian religions. Christians are viewed as Western agents in South Asian countries such as Pakistan, and some Muslims believe that when it comes to interreligious dialogue, Christians have their own motives and goals to sit with Muslims aside from social issues. They further claim that the West is supporting Christians in terms of making certain policies to turn this Muslim state into Christendom.⁵⁸ On the other side, Pakistani Christians' adoption of colonial legacy, in which Christians are

⁵⁸ See, Muhammad Shahid Habib, *Muslim-Christian Dialogue from Pakistani Perspective: Evaluation.*

of the Contribution of Christian Study Center.

divided into numerous denominations and are still enslaved by Western policies is another major challenge in this context. In this regard, it is important to note that, on the first hand, theological libraries have a lot of Western literature, while Urdu literature is rare. Seminaries and Bible schools, on the other hand, have no solution for honor killing and rape cases, and many churches, sadly, remain silent on forced conversion cases.⁵⁹

Furthermore, it has been observed that Asian Christianity's easy-breezy approaches to forgetting the identity of the church and the uniqueness of Christ cause further divisions among Asian Christians. Thus, in this perspective, even though, in Asia, the opportunities to align with the Christian faith have more potential other than West due to biblical context, biblical authors, and historical events.⁶⁰ However, the Asian context will be unable to achieve anything unless significant consideration is given to contemporary challenges. Therefore, re-evaluation is required to restore the Christian faith relevant to the biblical framework rather than any man-made ideology.

Thus, it is concluded that the path to emancipation towards these challenges does not end here; there is still much more to come. In terms of hunger, sorrow, rape, honor killing, and so on. Also, there are economic challenges that could be addressed in this phenomenon. Nonetheless, the Church must be a true reflection of Christ in order to respond to these social issues by demonstrating Christ's love to the rest of the world.

⁵⁹ See Charles Amjad- Ali, *Historical and Political Context of Christian-Muslim Relations in Pakistan: Challenges to Missiological and Theological Vocation*, Also See Maysood Kamil, *Pakistan*. The Ecumenical Review.

⁶⁰ Johnson and Gina A. Bellofetto, *Upon Closer Examination: Status of World Christianity*, 114.

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