



Curriculum Theologiae

## Theological Development and Training in India

Michael Amaladoss

<https://doi.org/10.48604/ct.119>

Submitted on: 2012-10-26

Posted on: 2012-10-26

(YYYY-MM-DD)

This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

### You are free to:

**Share** — copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format.

**Adapt** — remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially.

### Under the following terms:

**Attribution** — You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

**ShareAlike** — If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you must distribute your contributions under the same license as the original.

**No additional restrictions** — You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits.

## THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING IN INDIA

A book by Robin Boyd on the history of Indian theology starts its account from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first Indian theologians were Hindus who were attracted by the teachings of Jesus, but who did not like to join the church that still had a foreign, colonial face. The Christians also, both Indians like Brahmabandab Upadhyaya and foreigners like Farquahar and Johnanns, were appreciative of the religious and philosophical riches of India and sought to present Christianity as fulfilling the Indian quest for *moksha* or ultimate liberation. While Farquahar wrote a book on Christianity as the Crown of Hinduism, Johanns wrote a series of pamphlets *To Christ through the Vedanta*. Such a comparative approach in the context of a ‘preparation-fulfilment’ paradigm continued through theologians like Josef Neuner and George Gispert-Sauch and visionaries and mystics like Jules Monchanin and Henri Le Saux, who wrote *Saccidananda*, trying to show how the *advaitic* or non-dual experience of a Hindu sage, Ramana Maharishi, could find fulfilment in the Christian Trinity, conceived as *Sat* – Truth or Reality, *Cit* – Consciousness and *Ananda* – Bliss.

Then came the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65, which made us aware of the Church as a communion of local Churches and launched a process of inculturation, with the liturgy in the vernacular as the first step. In 1979 a seminar on *Theologizing in India Today* brought together in Pune most of the leading theologians in the country. Two of the major points in this seminar were the need to dialogue with the spiritual and theological traditions of India and to base one’s theological reflection not merely on rational reflection but on spiritual experience - *anubhava*. This quest is soon linked to the ashram tradition – an Indian way of living the monastic life, which had started even before the Council. Henri Le Saux or Swami Abhishiktananda, Raimon Panikkar, Bede Griffiths, Sara Grant, Vandana, Swami Amalorananda and Sebastian Painadath belong to this tradition. The theological focus is on *advaita* or non-duality. *Advaita* denies both dualism and monism in describing the relation between God and the world. God and the world are not-two. While God is Absolute, the world is totally dependent on God and does not stand against God. There is only one Absolute Reality, which does not exclude other dependent realities. Such an *advaitic* perspective is fully realized in Jesus Christ, God-man. Through and in Jesus Christ God is inviting all of us to participate in such an experience. Jesus prays: “As you Father are in me and I in you, may they also be in us.” (Jn 17:21) One way of attaining such an experience is through contemplative concentration, using some of the prayer techniques of the *Yoga*.

One prepared for such an experience through a reading of the Hindu scriptures. In 1973, there was a Seminar in Bangalore on the question whether the Scriptures of other religions can be considered inspired. The answer was positive. One spoke of three divine covenants: in nature, with the Jews and in Jesus Christ. The other religious scriptures belong to God’s covenant with nature already in creation and through ancestors like Noah. Just as we read the Hebrew scriptures in the light of the New Testament, the scriptures of other religions too can be read in the context of our Christian faith. This openness will grow into a recognition of other religions as facilitators of salvific divine-human encounter. Such openness will be confirmed by John Paul II, who recognized the presence and action of the

Spirit of God, not merely in all individuals, but also in all cultures and religions. A visible high-point of this openness was his invitation to the leaders of religions to come to Assisi to pray for peace in October 1986, 25 years ago.

Such openness led to another theological seminar on *Sharing Worship* (1988), which was positive to the possibility of different religious believers participating in each other's worship, under certain conditions, because there is only one God whom all are worshipping through various symbols. A deep involvement with other religions led to a double Hindu-Christian identity for some. The disciple, Mark, of Swami Abhishkthananda was initiated to *sannyasa* jointly by himself and the Hindu Swami Chidananda. Raimon Panikkar famously said: "I left Europe for India as a Christian, I discovered I was a Hindu and returned as a Buddhist without ever having ceased to be a Christian." His mature reflections have been presented in his last book *The Rhythm of Being*, published last year (2010). The theological literature coming out of this movement is abundant. Many methods of self-realization are being taught and practiced both in and outside India. Most novices in India will go to an ashram for a period of immersion into Indian Christian spirituality and *sadhana*. Christians from other countries too come to India for similar experiences. The numbers may be small. But its influence in theological reflection is substantial. Any mature future Indian theology will be based on the *advaita* or non-duality as opposed to the dualistic perspective that dominates official Latin theology. The Buddhist theory of '*pratitya samutpada*' (dependent co-arising) can also be linked to this.

Side by side with this development in interreligious encounter there were a small group of theologians who were dialoguing with the Marxist tradition – as distinct from the different Communist parties in India. M.M. Thomas and Sebastian Kappen were outstanding figures in this area. They were pioneers of a certain liberation theology searching for justice for the poor. While M.M. Thomas was focusing on Christian participation in politics, Kappen was more interested in cultural transformation and suggested a counter-culture that will be different from the oppressive elements both of tradition and of modernity.

In 1976-78 the Jesuits in India launched a Commission for Inculturation in formation. It came out with four guiding principles: vernacularization, regionalization, contextualization and integration. This led to the restructuring of formation programmes for Jesuits from the Novitiate onwards. As far as theology was concerned, it led to the founding of Regional Theological Centres. Vernacularization meant that theology was done and taught no longer in English but in the vernacular – that is, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada, etc. – as far as possible. Regionalization supposed that the theologians were trained, not exclusively in some common national centre, but in regional centres, spending at least two or three years (out of four) there. Contextualization demanded that a new method of theologizing from experience be adapted. Integration suggested that theologizing is not an isolated intellectual pursuit. It has to lead to a personal, spiritual and apostolic transformation, integrating apostolic experience and reflection, academic learning and spirituality. It was also supposed that eventually the human and social sciences and philosophy will be integrated with theology as far as possible, also at the academic level. The Jesuits started about Regional Theological Centres across

India using 8 different languages. The Congregation of Mary Immaculate has two. But the method has impacted many regional seminaries and theologates of religious congregations where the principles of contextualization, integration and even vernacularization are applied at various levels.

This new method is based on what is called the Theological Pastoral Cycle. Theology used to be described as 'Faith seeking understanding.' Today it would be rephrased as '*Faith-commitment seeking transformation of life and the world through understanding and empowerment.*' Let me briefly elaborate this. Faith is not merely belief in unknown realities revealed to us. Faith is a commitment to the person of Jesus who is calling us to join him in proclaiming and witnessing to the Kingdom of God in the Church as its symbol and servant. As we try to live this faith in the world many questions of meaning concerning difficult relations with people and nature, injustice and oppression, meaningless suffering, death, etc. confront us. We try to clarify the question through an analysis that takes into account the economic and political, personal and social, cultural and religious dimensions of life in the world. We will come across many world views and ideologies. Once the question is somewhat clarified we try to correlate it with the tradition of faith and the scriptures looking for answers to our questions. Our faith puts us in touch with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the Spirit and God's own plan in history for the world leading it to its fullness. God is not offering us ready-made solutions to problems, but is inviting us to participate in making ourselves and the world better. This initiates a process of dialogue. In the light of the new understanding we have, we ask ourselves what we need to do. This is a process of discernment of what God is inviting us to do. We try to be empowered by becoming aware of the example of Jesus and by experiencing the presence and action of the Spirit in us and in the world. Then we get involved in living and acting in the world. We face new problems and the cycle starts again. Theology is the knowing and reflective dimension of this process, which can be shared with others through writing or other media.

In this process, one is not so much taught a theological system, but is initiated to a continuing process of theologizing. Some attempted theological systems will be encountered on the way. We may choose to follow one or the other. Or we may make up our own. There is also an effort to integrate experience, knowledge, spirituality and life/action.

As a matter of fact this method is practiced more widely than in the Regional Theological Centres mentioned above. Many of the meetings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences are preceded by a period of experience before reflection, expression and taking practical orientations. The Indian Theological Association has been looking at various theological issues more or less following this method for over twenty five years. Many regional seminaries seek to build into their programmes periods of experiential immersion, followed by regular week-end exposures to pastoral situations. It is important to prepare for the exposure and go with questions that come from our faith-commitment. After the experience it is necessary to analyse it and surface a theological question. This is a crucial moment. During analysis We look at economical, political, personal, social, cultural and religious dimensions of the experience. But we are not interested primarily in the

economic and other dimensions, though these cannot be ignored, but in the religious or faith dimension. Religion itself may have legitimating and prophetic tendencies. After clarifying our reflection and renewing our commitment we need the help of the human and social sciences again to help us to discern what we can concretely do in the situation.

Theology done in this manner is called contextual theology. Obviously, important elements in the context will claim a special attention of theologians. In India Dalit and Tribal theologies have become very active. Dalits are the oppressed people who are considered untouchable at the bottom of the caste system in India. While the caste system is religiously justified in terms of ritual purity and pollution by Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism practice it though they do not justify it. The Christian Dalits feel doubly oppressed since the government denies them the privileges given to other Dalits. It is strange that the Dalits too practice discrimination among themselves. The focus of Dalit theologies has so far been their oppression and the feeling that Jesus also was marginalized in his day. Today there is a note of hope that the risen Jesus may liberate them from their dalitness. At the moment the tendency is to focus on themselves and look on everyone else as the enemy and the oppressor. They will have to understand that a socially discriminatory system cannot be transformed unless everyone is somehow involved in the transformation. To make this possible they will have to reach out to others. Just now their theology does not seem to have any space for this. Tribal theologies are less aggressive. But they too are focusing on their separate identity. There is a need therefore to promote multiculturalism in which every group can protect their identity, but at the same time relate to everyone else as a community. Multiculturalism is an issue everywhere today and we could learn from each other. There is a real risk, however, that narrowly contextual theologies like the Dalit and Tribal ones ignore the wider dominant cultures which also we need to dialogue with and transform. Our mission is universal and is not limited to the betterment of Dalits, Tribals and other oppressed groups.

Feminist and ecological theologies have a certain commonality across the world. But concrete problems and orientations may differ from culture to culture. The Indian religious cultures in which God is seen as male and female and goddesses have an important role may give feminist theology a special accent and insight. Similarly the Indian attitude to the body and the earth is not as dichotomous as the Greek. The system of Yoga seeks to integrate the body and the spirit with the cosmos through the force of energy that is cosmic, human and spiritual. It is such integration that gives a special place to art in theologizing. Indian religious art is not mere illustration. It is an aid to contemplation and concentration. Its images are seen as instruments of personal integration. The temples are built as macrocosmic reproductions of the human body. Walking from the entrance to the sacred centre is equivalent to letting the energy arise from the base of the spine to the crown of the head in the yogic sadhana. Artists like Jyoti Sahi have made sculpture and painting into media of theology and prayer. In recent years he has focused on Tribal art and on ecological themes.

India is a multi-cultural and multi-religious country. It is a secular democratic republic. Its secularism is not negative to religion, but positive to all religions, even specially supportive of minority ones. In such a situation it is the responsibility of the religions to

provide a common basis of principles and values for public life. This is done through dialogue leading to a broad consensus on the rights and duties of the people. Such a dialogue can be called inter-religious or public theology. Mahatma Gandhi was a pioneer. M.M. Thomas and Kappen will be in the same line. There are some younger theologians who continue the tradition.

A more recent trend is Comparative Theology. Studies in comparative religion tend to look at the various religions from the outside, claiming a neutral point of view. Comparative theology, on the other hand, looks comparatively at the sacred texts of another religion from one's own faith perspective rooted in the sacred texts of one's own religion. Francis Clooney of Harvard is one of those who has been focusing on Hindu texts in comparison with Christians ones. In a way, others who were reading Hindu texts in the context of Christian prayer were doing the same some years ago, though with less scientific rigour.

Another characteristic of Indian theology is the growing realization that India has a way of thinking that is different from the Greek way of thinking that conditions much of Euro-American theology. The Greek outlook is dichotomous separating the divine from the human, the body from the spirit, the human from the world. It is based on abstract universal concepts and the process of reflection is largely logical and deductive. Induction is limited to science. There has been a turn to the subject in the Euro-American theory of knowledge during and after the Enlightenment. This has led to a certain relativism where each one sets up his/her truth. The Indian way of thinking is symbolic and relational. It is pluralistic without being relativist. While Reality is one and knowable what we know can be pluralistic because it depends on the human, historical and cultural conditionings of the knower. All this could lead to *apophatism* or negative theology, when all that we can say is what God is not, not what God is. Even when we are not able to speak about God we can still experience God. Indians also prefer a perspective of 'both-and' to 'either-or'. Its ontological framework is *advaitic* and relational. This does not mean that Indians cannot do abstract thinking. Indians are good mathematicians. The number '0' was discovered by Indians. But in the spiritual realm their knowing is subject to holistic experience, including the imaginations and emotions. Contextual theology also interacts more with the human and social sciences than with pure philosophy, which, however, is very fragmented in the post-modern era.

The project of integration remains a problem. In spite of the methods of contextual theologizing the integration of theological reflection with life and ministry is yet to be fully achieved. The contextual method remains only a method of learning, not a way of life. A Jesuit Commission worked out a programme for the integration of philosophy and theology more than a decade ago. Half-hearted efforts had been made earlier. But no one has tried out the proposed programme yet. Maybe the sort of creative, integrated and competent persons with a broad background in philosophy and theology are not there!

My presentation so far about various current trends in Indian theology may give you an impression that many radical changes are taking place. As a matter of fact these are

starting points for new creative movements. They still need to mature. They also encounter a lot of obstacles from various quarters. Theology remains largely a clerical male preserve. Lay people do not enter into it because they cannot earn a decent living wage with it. A very few religious sisters are active in the field. There is a small association of women theologians. Theological institutes are not given university status by the secular Indian government. So they are isolated from the intellectual mainstream in the country. Theology is done in seminaries focused on the formation of priests. So they are controlled by the Vatican Congregations in various ways. An ordinary Indian theologian is torn in three directions. He likes to be an Indian theologian in context. The Vatican claims to have a context-free universal theology, largely Scholastic in orientation and codified in the Catholic Catechism. The present Pope has even claimed a normative status for the Greek theology of the first centuries. He would like to impose it everywhere. Most of the Indian theologians, for various reasons, are formed in Euro-American schools and do not have a clear Indian orientation. So they are not very rooted and creative. So there is a confused plurality of voices.

I think that all theology is contextual, whatever their pretensions. I wonder whether we can speak of broad systems and grand narratives in a post-modern world. We have to come to terms with pluralism in a positive, non-relativist, sense. Yet Indian theologians feel marginalized in the Church today. Though the demographic shift of the Church is towards the South, Euro-Americans still think that they are the centre of the Church and of theology. Actual power relations are structured that way. The other contextual theologies are reduced to peripheral status. If an Indian theologian is invited to any international meeting it will normally be to talk about inter-religious dialogue and its consequences for Christology and mission. His interaction with the others will be one-sided. He has to have one foot in Euro-America. He will be expected to be familiar with Euro-American languages, cultures, questions and theologies. Very few Euro-Americans will know anything about Indian or other Third-World cultures, religions, questions and theologies, in spite of the valiant efforts of agencies like Institut Missio to promote such knowledge. This may be the moment to place on record our grateful recognition of the continuing contribution of Institut Missio to the growth and development of Indian and other contextual theologies.

Karl Rahner said that at the Second Vatican Council the Church became aware of being a global Church and a catholic communion of local Churches. That dream has yet to become a reality. But the Indian theologians are trying to make their own small contribution hoping for the coming of better times.

Michael Amaladoss, S.J.

Institute of Dialogue with Cultures and Religions, Chennai, India.