

Laval théologique et philosophique



## Liberation Theologies from Asia

Michael Amaladoss

Volume 54, Number 3, octobre 1998

De la libération. Philosophies et théologies de la libération

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/401183ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/401183ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Amaladoss, M. (1998). Liberation Theologies from Asia. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 54(3), 529–541. <https://doi.org/10.7202/401183ar>

# LIBERATION THEOLOGIES FROM ASIA

Michael Amaladoss

College of Theology  
Delhi, India

*RÉSUMÉ : On associe habituellement la théologie de la libération à l'Amérique latine. Cet article entend montrer que des théologies de la libération sont bien vivantes aussi en Asie, non seulement parmi les chrétiens, mais chez d'autres croyants également. L'auteur introduit d'abord le lecteur aux théologies chrétiennes de la libération, en provenance de la Corée (la théologie minjung), des Philippines (la théologie du combat), et de l'Inde (la théologie dalit). Le lecteur est ensuite introduit aux théologies de la libération de différentes autres religions d'Asie. L'auteur conclut en signalant certains éléments caractéristiques des théologies asiatiques de la libération : elles sont inter-religieuses, intégrales, engagées dans un combat non violent, avec une vision eschatologique.*

*ABSTRACT : Liberation theology is traditionally associated with Latin America. This article shows that liberation theologies are very much alive also in Asia, not only among Christians, but also among other believers. He first introduces the reader to Christian liberation theologies coming from Korea (Minjung Theology), from the Philippines (the Theology of Struggle) and India (Dalit Theology). Then the reader is introduced to liberation theologies from different Asian religions. In the conclusion, the author points to some elements that are characteristic of Asian liberation theologies : they are inter-religious, integral, and engaged in non-violent conflict with an eschatological vision.*

---

When we speak about liberation theology, we immediately think about Latin America. Yet it is enough to evoke some one like Mahatma Gandhi to realize that reflection on liberation from socio-political oppression inspired by religious perspectives, in the 20th century, is special neither to Latin America nor to Christianity. It is true however that liberation theologies from Asia have not been explored very much. Once we start exploring, we find an abundance of material. A seminar on liberation theologies in India some years ago went back to a tradition that starts with the Buddha in the 6th century B.C.E. and leads to Mahatma Gandhi and others in the present.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages I shall introduce you to the richness of liberation themes in the countries and religions from Asia.<sup>2</sup> The bibliography will help you to deepen

---

1. Cf. Paul PUTHANANGADY, ed., *Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation*, Bangalore, National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1986.

2. For a more detailed presentation and a more complete bibliography, see Michael AMALADOSS, *Life in Freedom. Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1997.

and extend your knowledge further. I shall start with a brief presentation of Christian liberation theologies that have had their origin in Asia. Then I shall introduce you to liberation reflection in the various major Asian religions, concluding with a brief reference to cosmic religions. I shall then try to show, by way of conclusion, how Christian reflection in Asia seeks to integrate this rich diversity and draw inspiration from them.

### MINJUNG THEOLOGY

Though there has been a Christian reflection on liberation in all the Asian countries, I shall focus here on what one could call movements that have been carried on for sometime with the collaboration of many people.

*Minjung Theology* reflects the quest for liberation of the poor of Korea.<sup>3</sup> The word *minjung* means the masses of people, as opposed to those who are in power and who oppress them in various ways. Minjung theology arose when Korea was rapidly industrializing itself. Many of the rural poor were attracted to the cities as industrial labour. They had poor wages and miserable living conditions. The rich industrialists who exploited them were supported by the political regime which was supported by military power.

The minjung experience is characterized by *han*, which is a feeling of resentment, repressed anger and helplessness. *Han* is countered by *dan* which is the experience of the divine in us which leads us to transform ourselves and the world through liberative action. This drive for liberation finds expression symbolically in satirical mask dances, known as *mudang*. These dances help not only in releasing the tensions of *han*, but also in achieving a certain self-transcendence that makes one's response to the oppressive situation not a gesture of revenge but constructive and creative action. Reading the Bible, the minjung discover Jesus who becomes one with the minjung of his day — the sinners, publicans and prostitutes — in order to free them, assuring them of God's preferential love. Unlike Moses, who only led the people, Jesus becomes one with the people.

As the minjung become aware of the presence and action of God in their midst, they also perceive God's action in their history. The history of the Korean people has been a history of oppression by foreign or local political power. But the people have always revolted against their oppressors. The story of these successive struggles for liberation is read as a minjung history of salvation, which inspires and encourages them in their present struggle. It is interesting to note that these struggles have not always been "Christian" struggles. However, particular attention is devoted to the period of Japanese colonization, during which the Bible was considered a subversive book and the circulation of the books of Exodus and Daniel were forbidden.

---

3. Cf. COMMISSION ON THEOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF THE CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE OF ASIA, *Minjung Theology. People as Subjects of History*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1983.

The minjung refuse the political messianisms of the colonizers, of the marxists and of the capitalists. They also reject the other-worldly salvations offered by certain types of Buddhism and Christianity. Their own vision of the future is eschatological, rooted in history and yet transcending it. Minjung theology is noted for its rootedness in and inclusive vision of its history.

### A THEOLOGY OF STRUGGLE

The theology of struggle had its origins in the Philippines, during the time when attempts to develop the country supported by a dictatorial regime under Marcos lead to an increasing gap between the few rich and the many poor.<sup>4</sup> The poor farmers and the tribal populations were exploited by a few rich landlords concentrating on export-oriented crops. The promised land reforms never materialized. The growing industries and cities spawned a mass of urban poor who were exploited in various ways. The Christians who felt challenged by such a situation and who chose to struggle with the poor were accused of being marxists and marginalized even by the Church.

Their theological reflection focuses on their *struggle* for liberation. It is not a theology *about* the struggle, but *of* and *in* the struggle developed *by* the poor people who are engaged in it. It is a popular theology that finds expression in the spontaneous prayers of the basic communities, in popular liturgies that integrate song, mime, readings from the Bible and dance. People express their outrage at the injustices suffered by them, identify with the suffering Jesus, experience the presence of God among them and feel empowered to act for their liberation. This movement came to a head in the revolution that overthrew Marcos in February 1986. But the fruits of the revolution were appropriated by the political class, leaving the mass of the poor where they were and the struggle continues, though with less intensity than before.

The reflections of the people are very much centred on the Bible and on the liturgy. Their social analysis takes the form of psalms. Their protests become prayers. They re-enact their suffering in the form of para-liturgies. The *pasyon* or the narrative of the passion of Jesus becomes an occasion for the workers and peasants to identify their own sufferings with the redemptive sufferings of Jesus. A confession of faith reads :

I believe that our country — like Christ — is also crucified by the landlords who sit on thrones like kings [...]. I believe that Christ rose from the dead. This will also happen with the oppressed. They will rise up, they will dream dreams. All will fight. The struggle will continue. In their struggle they have one wish : that they too will join in the attainment and establishment of the Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

This summarizes the theology of the struggle. Edicio de la Torre gave a pictorial representation of the theology by painting Christ crucified, with one hand open and the other clenched into a fist.

4. See Mary Rosario BATTUNG *et al.*, *Religion and Society. Towards a Theology of Struggle*, Manila, Fides, 1988.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

I thought how people are at the start — one hand open ; begging for some relief from those above them, but clenched fists against each other, competing for what trickles down. At the end of the organizing process, the clenched fists are directed to their proper target ; upwards. The open hands receive each other as companions in a shared struggle.<sup>6</sup>

Christ is not an answer to our questions, but is the question that provokes us into committing ourselves to the struggle.

### DALIT THEOLOGY IN INDIA

The Indian term *dalit* means “broken,” “trampled upon.”<sup>7</sup> It is the name which the outcastes of India prefer to give to themselves. Indian society is organized in terms of castes. A caste is an occupation-based, hereditary, endogamous group. There are more than 4000 castes in India. These are hierarchically ordered in terms of ritual purity : priests, warriors, traders and workers. Below this hierarchy are the outcastes who are also socially ostracized as untouchables, because of their impure occupations like handling night-soil, animal carcasses, etc. They represent more than 125 million people. The dalits who have become Christians in an attempt to escape the system feel doubly marginalized both in the Church and in society. Dalit theology is the liberative reflection of this oppressed group of people. Untouchability is illegal in India today and the government has many programs of affirmative action in their favour. But a social system that has existed over 3 millennia cannot be reformed by law over a few years. We have to change, not only the peoples’ mind-set, but also the socio-economic conditions that favour the discriminatory system. The Christian dalits feel particularly betrayed. While they suffer the same discriminations in society, the affirmative action programs of the government are not available to them, since the government maintains that as Christians they do not belong to the caste system. But religious conversion does not bring about social transformation. The thousands of dalits who embraced Buddhism, following their leader Dr. Ambedkar, have had the same experience.

The dalits find inspiration for their struggle for liberation in the experience of God and of Jesus as communicated in the Bible. God chose the poor and homeless Israelites as God’s own people and gave them the promised land (Deut. 26:5-12). The dalits see their conversion to Christianity as a movement towards liberation, by becoming God’s people. In Jesus, God becomes Dalit. The character of a dalit is to serve. Jesus becomes the suffering servant. He keeps company with the outcastes of his day like the publicans and sinners. He washes the feet of his disciples. He is marginalized, disowned by his own people and dies as an outcast, outside the city gates. His resurrection is a promise of liberation for the dalits with whom he identified himself during his lifetime.

---

6. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

7. Cf. James MASSEY, *Indigenous People. The Dalits*, Delhi, ISPCK, 1994.

The table-fellowship of Jesus, to which he invites the outcasts and sinners of his day, is a concrete example of the new fellowship to which Jesus invites everyone.<sup>8</sup> This new community of people finds their roots in their common community with God. This is the meaning of the Eucharist. Jesus rejects the Jewish laws of purity and pollution concerned with washing and eating. He condemns those who seek special places at banquets. But Paul's experience with the Corinthians shows that the symbolic power of the Eucharist has to be rediscovered anew in every place and time.

Jesus' option for the outcasts is not an exclusive option since his ultimate goal is to gather all peoples into a community of equality and justice. The continuing celebration of the Eucharist in the Church must be prepared for and continued in action for a new community in which every form of discrimination will disappear.

### HINDUISM AND LIBERATION

The ultimate goal of Hindu religious practice is *moksha* or liberation. This goal has been interpreted both as a cosmic liberation and as the establishment of a just society governed by *dharma* or righteousness on this earth here and now. The popular divine incarnations or manifestations like Rama and Krishna did not come to the earth in order to lead people to an other-worldly heaven, but to reestablish *dharma* on this earth. Perhaps this distinction between this world and the next is foreign to Hinduism, which believes in rebirth, though ultimate liberation, — not from this world but from the cycle of births, — remains in the horizon. One can see that the term liberation itself need not be univocal in a multi-religious context and that traditional Christian liberation theology can broaden its perspectives in dialogue with other religions.

The obstacle to liberation is *karma* or selfish action, which can have both individual and social-structural forms. Liberation will come, not from the avoidance of action, but through action without attachment — *nishkama karma* —, done in accordance with *dharma* or one's duty in the context of world order. This vision that is conveyed by epics that recount the story of popular incarnations like Rama and Krishna is translated into practical socio-political action by modern Hindu leaders like Gandhi. It is significant that every great modern Hindu leader has written a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* which presents Krishna's answer to evil and conflict in the world and his encouragement to desireless action. The list of Hindu socio-religious reformers and socio-political activists in this century is long. I shall limit my attention to Gandhi as a better-known example.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) is known as the father of the Indian nation and the most active part of his life coincides with the Indian struggle for political liberation.<sup>9</sup> Though Gandhi himself saw liberation as a holistic project with eco-

---

8. See Michael AMALADOSS, *A Call to Community. The Caste System and Christian Responsibility*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1994.

9. Ignatius JESUDASAN, *A Gandhian Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 1984.

nomic, social and even spiritual dimensions besides the political one, his efforts were not particularly fruitful in non-political areas. Gandhi was deeply rooted in Hinduism. But he was influenced by Jainism as well as Christianity, drawing particular inspiration from the Sermon on the Mount and the non-violent struggle of Jesus on the cross. Gandhi spells out his vision of integral liberation in the following words :

I shall work for an India, in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice ; an India in which there shall be no high class and low class of people ; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men [...] <sup>10</sup>

Gandhi saw God as Truth — *Satya* —, with its ontological (since its root *Sat* means being) and moral resonance, as the goal of life. Truth is what *is* — the whole of Being. Gandhi believed in the unity of all things in God. This meant that God can be experienced in the world and in people. Service of others is service of God. That is why he said :

The best and the most understandable place where He can be worshipped is the living creature. The service of the distressed, the crippled and the helpless among living things constitutes worship of God. <sup>11</sup>

He traced back the whole of his spirituality to the first verse of the *Isa Upanishad* : “Behold everything in the form of God ; leaving the transient ; cling to the eternal.” So he described his struggle to reach Truth through socio-political action as *satyagraha* or clinging to truth. It was not mere politics, but religious effort — *sadhana*. He trained a group of followers who could struggle with him in his *ashrams* through a program of self-discipline, which he spelt out as consisting of celibacy, truthfulness, love or non-violence (*ahimsa*), non-stealing and non-possession.

Gandhi’s chosen way for struggling for Truth is *ahimsa* or non-violence, which means, in positive terms, love. Gandhi himself explains it in the following way :

The principle of *ahimsa* is hurt by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody [...] It is not merely a negative state of harmlessness but it is a positive state of love ; of doing good even to the evil-doer. But it does not mean helping the evil-doer to continue the wrong or tolerating it by passive acquiescence. On the contrary, love, the active state of *ahimsa*, requires you to resist the wrong-doer by dissociating yourself from him even though it may offend him or injure him personally. <sup>12</sup>

The focus of *ahimsa* therefore is not to hurt the other, but to challenge him/her to a change of heart. The best way to do this is persuasion and Gandhi was ready to impose suffering on himself in the process of provoking the other to change. It is in this way that he perfected the art of fasting, even unto death, as a technique of non-violent struggle. Gandhi also suggested that one cannot really be non-violent, if one is not ready for sacrifice and free from fear. Non-violence is not for the weak.

---

10. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

12. Mahatma GANDHI, *From Yerawada Mandir : Ashram Observances*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Press, 1959, p. 8.

He saw his struggle as a progressive one, tending towards Ultimate Truth through the limited and relative truths of life and history. That is why he described his life as "The Story of My Experiments with Truth."<sup>13</sup> He was ready for compromise and change in the art of practical politics. He also perceived the different religions as relative expressions of one Ultimate Truth and worked for a harmony of religions around the pursuit of Ultimate Truth. Gandhi felt free to interpret Hinduism, though he was loyal to it in a deep way.

### LIBERATION IN BUDDHISM

Buddhism would seem to be a model of a world-denying religion that seeks liberation in *nirvana* or emptiness, as it is usually interpreted. The ideal Buddhist is the monk who renounces the world in pursuit of absolute detachment, seeking to do away with desire, which is diagnosed as the cause of suffering. Yet the political involvement of monks in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Burma is well known. Bhikku Buddhadasa in Thailand and Thich Nhat Hanh in Vietnam have not only inspired political activists, but, in the process, have reinterpreted Buddhism in new ways. There is an International Society for Engaged Buddhism with its headquarters in Bangkok. Even lay people like A.T. Ariyaratna have successfully applied the Buddha's teachings to programs for social transformation. The secret lies in the fact that the Buddha sought for freedom from desire, not for some future life, but for a happy life here and now. Secondly, there has been a Buddhist tradition of compassion which urged people to share the secret of freedom with people who are still caught up in the cycle desire-suffering.

A.T. Ariyaratna followed the inspiration of Gandhi to promote "universal awakening" — *sarvodaya*.<sup>14</sup> But working in a predominantly Buddhist context, he tried to awaken the people by socializing the insights of the Buddha. The four noble truths of the Buddha were : There is suffering ; desire is its cause ; desire can be got rid of ; the way to do it is the eightfold path, namely right understanding, intention, speech, action, way of life, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Socially applied, suffering refers to all the problems that affect life in a village ; desire is individual and collective selfishness that is seen as the cause of the problems ; right orientation and right behaviour as a community then become the means towards development and well-being. A.T. Ariyaratna was not wrong to suggest that members of other religions too can follow these principles.

Bhikku Buddhadasa (1906-1993), a self-taught creative thinker, reinterpreted traditional Buddhism to preach *Dhammic Socialism* in Thailand.<sup>15</sup> After the Second

---

13. Mahatma GANDHI, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth. An Autobiography*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Press, 1945.

14. A.T. ARIYARATNA, *In Search of Development. The Savodaya Sramadana Movement's Efforts to Harmonize Tradition with Change*, Moratuwa, Sarvodaya Press, 1982.

15. Cf. Bhikku BUDDHADASA, *Dhammic Socialism*, Bangkok, Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development, 1986 ; Sulak SIVARAKSHA, *A Socially Engaged Buddhism*, Bangkok, Thai Inter-religious Commis-



World War, the country chose the path of liberal capitalism in which the poor were marginalized and had no voice. The youth were tempted by Marxism. Buddhadasa pointed to a middle path, by showing that Buddhism itself is socialist. Already in 1932, he founded a monastery with a significant title : *Suan Mokh* or The Garden of Liberation.

Nature or *dharma* — Buddhadasa considers them as equivalent — is socialist. It is made up of inter-dependant beings at every level, from the atoms and molecules to the stars and the planets. The Buddhist doctrine of not-self, or the absence of an ego as the centre of personality, is an affirmation of inter-dependence. In the phrase of Thich Nhat Hanh, being is *inter-being*. The root of injustice is the denial of this inter-dependence by egoism and selfishness. *Nirvana* is not emptiness of being, but emptiness of the ego and of attachment to it. When people attain the state of egolessness they live in accordance with nature or *dharma*, that is in an inter-dependant way. People suffer and impose suffering on others because they ignore this inter-dependence and behave egoistically, identifying themselves either with the ego or one of its five aggregates, namely, the physical body, feeling, perception, thinking or consciousness. To get rid of this feeling of me-and-mine is to become aware of one's socialistic nature. The way to get rid of the ego is to follow the path of wisdom, moral behaviour and insight. (Buddhadasa synthesizes the eight-fold path in these three phrases.) One need not quit the world in the pursuit of *nirvana*. One must rather be and act in the world, but mindful of *dharma* and free from all craving or desire. The Buddhist monks are not hermits, but wanderers who live in the world and teach the people the way to liberation. To become aware of one's inter-dependence is to have concern for the whole, to live with restraint and generosity and to treat others with respect and kindness.

Buddhadasa presents his dhammic socialism as an alternative to capitalism and communism. Capitalism is individualistic, selfish and greedy. It produces inequality. Communism, on the other hand, fragments the community into classes and thrives on conflict and hatred. Dhammic socialism promotes peace and harmony based on the principles of nature itself. Buddhadasa thinks that all religions are socialistic insofar as they preach against selfishness.

## LIBERATION AND CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism can be described as a way of living in harmony with nature. Nature is moral. What is, is what ought to be. Any deviations are products of human intervention. Such deviations however can be avoided. Help for following the way of nature is provided by the Scholars who point to the way after a deep study of nature and humanity. The Rulers are charged with maintaining the way of the universe by con-

---

sion for Development, 1988 ; Fred EPPSTEINER, *The Path of Compassion. Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism*, Berkeley, Parallax Press, 1988.

trolling the deviations. The Scholars have a prophetic role in the community, even against the Rulers, when it is necessary.<sup>16</sup>

When talking about the way, the confucian tradition looks at the human-person-in-community. The human person is related in multiple ways to the community. One can list five types of such relationships : father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, the old and the young and the relation between friends. To live happily is to be able to relate in all these ways as one ought to. In doing so one maintains the social order. The way of relationship or ritual becomes the keystone of moral behaviour. In a relationship, one thinks not only of oneself ; but also of the other ; one thinks not only of rights, but also of duties. In such a social context of relationship, the shame of not doing something that one ought to do is more of a force for good or proper behaviour than any abstract sense of obligation or external sanction.

The basic virtue in such a social context is *jan* or humanity. It has been described as "love of the others." When one is aware of being in community one realizes that one cannot really be happy unless everyone is also happy. The relationship to the other is not adversarial, but collaborative. The virtue of humanity is therefore manifested in a cluster of five other virtues : courtesy, generosity, good faith, diligence and kindness.

If you behave with courtesy, then you will not be insulted ; if you are generous, then you will win the multitude ; if you are of good faith, then other men will put their trust in you ; if you are diligent, then you will have success ; if you are kind, then you will be able to command others.<sup>17</sup>

This might look like self-centredness. But then the golden rule is : "Do not do to others what you would not like to be done to you."

Centred on the community and with harmony as its horizon, confucian society is at the antipodes of a society founded on the principles of individualism and competition. If the community functions as it ought to, under the guidance of scholars and kings, peace and harmony will be a natural result, though some of our notions of individual rights, equality and justice may be unintelligible in that context. Confucianism challenges us to rethink our own way of looking at community. It is also an example of a "secular" theology.

## LIBERATION IN ISLAM

Islamic liberation movements arise out of the experience of oppression of Muslim peoples during the colonial and post-colonial periods. They felt humbled by the colonial regimes. These were succeeded by governments by the local elite who was more secularized than Islamic. A search for identity and dignity leads to an Islamic resur-

---

16. Aloysius B. CHANG, "Liberative Elements in the Confucian Tradition," *Japanese Religions*, 16 (1990), p. 24-42 ; Kevin Shun-Kai CHENG, "The Social Dimension of Liberation in Early Confucian Tradition," *Ching Feng*, 36 (1993), p. 61-81.

17. CONFUCIUS, *Analects*, 17:6.

gence in many countries. Such resurgence, of course, can also be seen as fundamentalist or revivalist depending on one's point of view. Attempts at suppressing these movements have usually lead them to become more radical and even fundamentalist.<sup>18</sup>

Mawlana Sayyid Abul A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979) was a leader of Islamic resurgence.<sup>19</sup> He was born in India and migrated to Pakistan when India was divided. Like most Muslims, he strongly believed that the Qu'ran offered sufficient guidance for life and government. A journalist from his young age, he wrote an extensive commentary on the Qu'ran. The elite group of leaders that he founded lost much of its influence when it became one political party among others, becoming fundamentalist in the process.

God is unique and sovereign, to whom every other sovereignty is subject. Therefore, Mawdudi accepted democracy, but not the sovereignty of the people. The humans are only vice-gerents of God in the world. All are subject to God's law as revealed in the Qu'ran. The Qu'ran, of course, needs interpretation. The earth is God's and is equally available to all humans. This is the foundation for justice and equality among the humans. Special care for the poor, the widow and the orphan has always been part of Islamic law. God's absolute sovereignty is challenged by the forces of *Jaihiliya* (or secularism) which refuse divine guidance. People therefore are invited to withstand the forces of *Jaihiliya* and strive to establish the divine order. This is what is called *jihād*. This is primarily a moral struggle within the Islamic community oriented to reform. Mawdudi set particular store on specially trained leaders to guide the people in the law of God. But such leadership does not in any way reduce the responsibility of every one for social order, since each one is a vice-gerent of God. So every one has a right to be consulted and consensus among Muslims is the normal form of decision making. Mawdudi called this theo-democracy. People delegate their authority to the rulers and can depose them, if they do not follow the law of God. The law of God — the *Shariah* — is all embracing, though Mawdudi insists more on internal attitudes than externals. He is against secularism because it is materialistic and privatizes religion. Though he recognizes some basic human qualities everywhere, he believes that Islam has a special mission of offering divine guidance to promote the good and restrain evil in society.

Ali Shariati (1933-1977) of Iran died a martyr for opposing the secularizing and americanizing (liberal capitalist) regime of the Shah in the name of Islam.<sup>20</sup> With doctorates in Sociology and the History of Religions, he was a prolific lecturer and writer, though much of this was done underground or from prison. His aim was to liberate Iranians from political oppression and cultural assimilation. He underlines the specificity of Islam as compared with other religions and ideologies in the following words :

---

18. John L. ESPOSITO, ed., *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983.

19. Sayyid Abul A'LA MAWDUDI, *The Islamic Movement. Dynamics of Values, Power and Change*, Leicester, The Islamic Foundation, 1984.

20. Ali SHARIATI, *Man and Islam*, Houston, Filinc, 1983.

An enlightened Muslim [...] should be fully aware of the fact that he has a unique culture which is neither totally spiritual, as is Indian culture, nor totally mystical, as is the Chinese, nor completely philosophical, as is the Greek, and not entirely materialistic and technological, as is the Western culture. His is a mixture of faith, idealism and spirituality, and yet full of life and energy with a dominant spirit of equality and justice [...]. Unlike other religions which justify poverty Islam condemns it. [Its] elements are based on constant striving (*jihad*) and justice. Islam pays attention to bread ; its eschatology is based on active life in the world ; its God respects human dignity and its messenger is armed.<sup>21</sup>

The God of Islam is a God of the oppressed and the unicity of God demands the unity of the community, characterized by justice and equality. Divisions in the community lead to polytheism. The people bear the responsibility for their life and destiny. People, jointly, are God's trustees to care for and share nature. Conflict between good and evil is inevitable. Evil can take many forms like oppressive power, exploitative riches and alienating ritualistic religion. Enlightened leaders should animate cultural reform. They will necessarily be prophets and must be ready for martyrdom.<sup>22</sup>

Among the countries where Muslims are in a majority, only Indonesia has tried to build up a political system that is based on consensus among the five officially recognized major religions.

### THE COSMIC RELIGIONS

The developed religions look down upon cosmic religions as primitive or animistic. As a matter of fact, however, the cosmic religions are closer to life and the developed religions have their roots in them. Their spirituality is this-worldly. Their religiosity focuses on basic needs of life in the world and in community. They have an elaborate ritual system to ward off evil. The conflict between spirits that they ritualize may often be a symbolic re-enactment of ongoing social conflict, having concrete social effects in the present. But these rituals are coded with reference to liberative events in the past, narrated in their myths, and can inspire more explicit liberative action in the present when the socio-political climate is appropriate. We can recall the statues of the Madonna, the rosaries and the street Eucharists that were part of the revolution in the Philippines. Tribals and peasants have had their revolutionary movements and messiahs. Revolutionary leaders like Gandhi have succeeded only when they were able to translate their ideology into popular symbols and gestures. In recent years, the Tribal peoples have been particularly sensitive to ecological issues. In defending the earth, they are defending their habitat and their vital resources.<sup>23</sup>

---

21. Ali SHARIATI, *What is to be done ? The Enlightened Thinkers and an Islamic Renaissance*, Houston, IRIS, 1986, p. 22-23.

22. We can see here a Shiite perspective that expects and glorifies martyrdom. One of the founding events of Shiism is the murder of Hussain, the son of the Prophet.

23. Cf. Aloysius PIERIS, "An Asian Paradigm : Inter-religious Dialogue and Theology of Religions," *The Month*, 26 (1993), p. 129-134.

## TOWARDS AN INTEGRAL LIBERATION

Dialoguing with the many liberative themes from the Asian religions, Christian theologians in Asia today see liberation as an inter-religious project.<sup>24</sup> Asian countries are multi-religious. Believers in different religions share the same economic, socio-political and cultural context. Social change can be achieved in such a situation only if every one works together. One, seemingly easy, way to promote collaboration among all is to privatize religion and secularize public life. While every one would agree that the State or political power should not identify itself with any one religion, we must not ignore the powerful inspiration and motivation that religions can provide in our struggle for liberation. Asia is a religious continent and one cannot ignore religion in promoting liberation. On the contrary, such an ignoring of religion will give rise to fundamentalist movements, with people trying to defend their religious identity, especially in a pluralist situation. The only other alternative seems to be for people to draw inspiration, each from his/her own religion, but collaborate with others in the defense and promotion of common human and spiritual values like freedom, justice, equality, community, etc. Such collaboration in the context of struggle may eventually lead to a dialogue and mutual enrichment and challenge also at the religious level. One could go further and say that this is the only authentic form of dialogue. It is significant that most Asian liberation theologians are open to such inter-religious collaboration. Not to mention the Christians, for whom the dialogue of life and of transformative action is official policy, one can evoke people like Ariyaratna, Buddhadasa, Thich Nhat Hanh, Gandhi, etc.

Secondly, liberation in Asia will be integral. The liberation theologies of Latin America, at least in its earlier phase, starting with Marxist inspired social analysis, focused on economic and political liberation. But Asian theologians have realized that one cannot promote economic and political change without promoting social equality, changing people's worldviews and value systems (culture), challenging the legitimating aspects of religion and converting people's hearts. Any effective quest for liberation must reach out to and include all these levels. All these dimensions are mutually involving and there is no need of prioritizing them in the name of an ideology, though one or other dimension may have strategic priority in a given situation. This is what we mean when we say that liberation must be integral.

In a situation of injustice, conflict is inevitable. In a conflict one cannot avoid taking sides. All the Asian religions would suggest that we choose to struggle with the poor. All the Asian religions, except Islam, with its ambiguous attitude to *jihad*, recommend non-violence as the most appropriate strategy. Christianity has had its crusades, declared and undeclared. But there is no doubt that the way of Jesus in the Gospel is one of non-violence and of humble service. Violence may occasionally overthrow a tyrant. But only non-violence can change hearts and bring about radical and permanent change.

---

24. For this section, see AMALADOSS, *Life in Freedom*, p. 199-223.

Finally, I think that all Asian religions would agree that total liberation is eschatological, whether it is envisaged as the Kingdom of God, *Nirvana*, *Moksha*, *Umma*, or harmony. Such a vision sets our present struggle in the horizon of hope, making it dynamic. That is what makes life worth living.