CHAPTER 10

Jesus as Liberator in the Theology of the *Dalits*

In recent centuries Christian theologians in India have sought a connection with the original religion of the country, Hinduism. Some have directed themselves toward the monistic philosophy of the Vedanta in the conviction that that was where the most elevated form of Hinduism was to be found. Others were convinced that the theistic *bhakti* devotion was more valuable because that was where such striking parallels with one's own Christian religion were to be found. But the missionary and theologian were always concerned with finding some connection to the pan-Indian Hindu tradition, which had its sources in the classical holy writings in Sanskrit.

But in addition to this Great Tradition, as cultural anthropologists call it, there is another Hinduism. It is called the Little Tradition of the religion of simple people who were not part of the high-minded and educated religious culture of the elite. The distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition is applicable in many cultural areas, but in Hindu India it certainly concerns a quite large and meaningful difference. The Great Tradition is the religion of those who can boast of a certain religious purity on the basis of birth in a certain caste. They posses the exclusive right to the rituals and the knowledge that is laid down in the sacred texts in Sanskrit. The countless people of lower birth were excluded of old and had no part in the practice of this religion. This did not mean that they had no religion. They worshipped the great Hindu gods or other local divine figures in their own way. They had their own temples, their own rituals with their own priests and, in part, their own mythology. Instead of holy Sanskrit they used the language of their area to express religious knowledge. Thus the Little Tradition does not concern only one religious complex that can be found universally in the same form. Rather, it concerns a great variety of religious elements, varying strongly in each area, caste or tribe.

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It is therefore also understandable that the Christian theologians paid no attention to this Little Tradition of Hinduism. In these circles there are no generally accepted sacred texts, no impressive buildings, and scarcely any reflective thinking has developed. And, above all, this form of religion is different in every part of the country. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that so little attention has been paid to this form of Hinduism, since the great majority of the Christian Indians belong there according to their social background! But here the strict hierarchal thinking that controls the Hindu culture takes its revenge. What Hinduism is is determined by the highest priestly groups in society. On the whole, the people at the bottom of society do not count —not in socio-economic terms nor in cultural-religious terms. The irrefutable caste system determines the view of the whole of society.

In Hindu culture, birth is determinative for one's life. Every person is born into a certain caste (*jati*). Every region contains a variety of castes, and across the entire country the castes number in total at least in the hundreds, although the exact number is disputable: whether similar castes in the one region are actually the same as in another region is difficult to determine. The basic idea of caste is hierarchy. It is not for nothing that the classic study on the Indian caste system is called *homo hierarchicus*.[1] The basis of this hierarchy is religious purity. The members of the higher castes would, through birth, possess a larger degree of purity that enables them to manage the sacred from a position closer by. Certain occupations belong to certain castes, and it is no wonder that the priesthood was linked of old to the highest caste, i.e. the brahman caste. The oldest sacred text of Hinduism, the Rig Veda, already points to a ritual hierarchy among people in a system of four classes (*varna*). It is this religious theory that has held sway over the differences among people for at least three millennia.

The four classes are arranged in decreasing degree of purity: brahman (priest), *kshatriya* (warriors and governors), *vaishya* (traders and farmers) and *shudra* (servants and labourers).

[1] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); original French edition published in 1966.

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Those in the first three of these four classes are called "reborn" (*dvija*) because they were allowed to undergo—like a second birth—a religious initiation that gives them the right to carry out sacrificial acts. The fourth class, that of the *shudra*, is much lower ritually, because for those who are members of that class such an initiation is not possible. Even much lower in the hierarchy are those who because of their caste background cannot even claim a position within the system of the four classes. They are *a-varna*, i.e. they do not belong within the four classes, and because of this their position on the ladder of purity is completely at the bottom. In the eyes of orthodox Hindus, they are extremely unclean, so much so that even contact with them will pollute "reborn" Hindus. This lowest layer of society consists of the original population that the Aryans encountered in their invasion of the Indian subcontinent. They are usually called the "untouchables" and in recent decades have been calling themselves *dalit*.

The original meaning of the Sanskrit word *dalit* is "broken"; it is therefore also a designation for people who are oppressed. One of the leaders of the untouchables in the nineteenth century, Mahatma Phule, used the word for the first time to refer to the perilous position of his people. Not until the 1970s did it come into use as a sobriquet assumed by the untouchables in a new and militant self-awareness . Since then *dalits* has become the general name for people in those castes who are excluded from the system of religious purity as used by the traditional Hindus. The number of *dalits* in India at this time is more than 150 million (about 15% of the population). Even in the India of today they live in a oppressed situation. *Dalits* always live in a separate district in the villages. They carry out the lowliest manual labour, among which serfdom is not uncommon. Although many earlier restrictions are now forbidden by law, they are often banned from using the village well, they have limited access to schools, temples and government institutions. *Dalits* are often the victim of public violence: maltreatment and rape by high-caste Hindus frequently occurs.

Thus the *dalits* occupy a very subservient position but they are part of the socio-economic structure. Since ancient times they have had a fixed, essential position. Jobs that in the eyes of the high-caste Hindus are very unclean were always assigned

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to them: handling dead people and animals, cleaning toilets, sweeping the streets, working leather, etc. Traditional village life would be turned completely upside down if the *dalits* refuse to do their work.

There are also groups low on the scale that have their place outside of the usual socio-economic structure. These are the people who live remotely in inaccessible areas in tribes. From the perspective of the caste system, they have a position that is similar to *dalits*. In their own circles they form more or less autonomous societies that have little social differentiation. Their untouchability is less noticeable that way: they do not come into contact with the usual caste society. The members of such tribes have chosen their own name, reflecting self-awareness. They call themselves the *adivasi*, i.e, original inhabitants of this land.

Throughout the centuries the Christian mission has been able to reach the *dalits* in particular—and the *adivasis* to a lesser degree. That is due to two reasons. First, there is the socio-economic reason: the *dalits* can expect, or at least assume, that they will move up when they convert to the Christian faith—to move down any lower than where they were is in any case impossible. But there was also a reason relating to content of the proclamation for the attraction of Christian preaching. The attention paid to the least in the Gospel is what attracted the *dalits*, although the preaching rarely applied the Gospel to the social reality in which they lived.

For that matter, should the *dalits* have thought they would be able to retreat completely from the caste system by converting, they were deceived. The hierarchal thinking in categories of inherited purity is so deeply anchored in Indian society that it has also determined church life to a larger degree. *Dalits* were addressed as people who were permitted to join the church, and that undoubtedly did them good. But they were usually permitted to belong to the ecclesiastical communities only as untouchables. It was very important for the missionaries of various confessions not to endanger the contacts with the influential brahmans in particular. Within the church as well the believers who were of brahman descent carried much more weight than those of low caste. Thus, there were divisions among groups of Christians on the basis of the Hindu rules of purity.

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In certain periods the Roman Catholic mission went the furthest in this. One of the first preachers in India, Roberto de Nobili, only attempted the conversion of the brahmans and refused all contact with those of the lower castes. Other missionaries worked alongside him among the non-brahmanic castes in the *shudra* class and there was also the separate mission for the untouchables.[2] In some parts of India this segregation into three parish categories was maintained until far into the twentieth century. In Kerala Roman Catholic priests who worked among the *shudras* was not even permitted to enter a Roman Catholic church for those of the high caste![3] Although the Protestant missionaries were far more inclined to challenge the caste way of thinking, they often succumbed to the pressure of the high castes, within and outside the church. Pandita Ramabai noticed in the church of Madras that the preachers used different cups in the same Holy Communion service for the church members of different Hindu backgrounds.[4] And there are stories of discrimination against *dalits* in earlier times from all regions: they had to sit in a separate enclosed part of the church, bury their dead in a separate cemetery, were not permitted to fill the function of reader or acolyte, and so on.[5] And examples of such discrimination can still be found today. For that matter, the Christian *dalits* have an extra problem in current society. The Indian government has an active policy of positive discrimination for the benefit of underdeveloped groups, who are registered for that purpose as "Scheduled Castes and Tribes." The Hindu and Buddhist *dalits* are included, but not the Christian *dalits*. They

[2] V. Devasahayam, "The Norms of Dalit Theology," in: V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi/Madras: I.S.P.C.K./ Gurukul, 1997), pp. 45-46. He makes a good comparison of this with the three tents in the Gospel story of the Transfiguration on the mountain.

[3] Charlie Pye-Smith, *Rebels and Outcasts: A Journey Through Christian India* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1997), p. 139

[4] Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), p. 6.

[5] See e.g. Jebamalai Raja, "The Problem of Caste within the Church," *Journal of Dharma* XXIV (1999): 28-39.

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are seen as receiving enough support from their religious community. Unfortunately, that is usually not the case.

In general, the *dalits* were marginalized in the Christian church. Little attention was paid to their poor position in society and others did not see their cultural-religious background. Dialogue with Hinduism was still always dialogue with the brahmans and their Great Tradition. Inculturation always meant the translation of the Christian faith with the aid of the concepts and rituals from the holy literature in Sanskrit. It did not appear to dawn on more than a very few that almost three quarters of Indian Christians did not descend from the population who followed that religion. But a change was signalled around 1980, and one may now speak of a reversal in the attitude with regard to *dalits* in the Indian churches.

The first sign of a changed understanding was the address that Arvind P. Nirmal (1936-1995) gave in 1981 at the United Theological College in Bangalore. The remarkable title of this speech was "Towards a Shudra Theology."[6] Nirmal asked that attention be paid to the renewed self-consciousness among the people of the lower castes and he saw it as the task of Christian theology to pursue this. Although Nirmal himself came from a *dalit* caste, he was not concerned primarily with the untouchables. He wanted to break through the monopoly of the brahman-oriented thought in the churches—thus the term "shudra theology." Similarly, the Jesuit Lancy Lobo argued that the clergy should become acquainted with the "non-Sanskritic" tradition.[7] Here, too, it involved resistance against the dominant influence of the brahman thinking.

The names cited above immediately give an indication as to the orientation of *dalit* theology. Theological training played a major role in the southern states as far as the Protestants were

[6] See Jesudas M. Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," http://jmathyal.tripod.com/. A revised version of Nirmal's famous lecture appeared later with the title: "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in: Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras Gurukul Lutheran Theological Institute and Research Institute, n.y), pp. 53-70. The changing of the title is typical!

[7] Lancy Lobo, "Towards an Inculturation in the Non-Sanskritic Tradition," *Vidyajyoti* 49 (1985): 16-28.

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concerned. There was, in the first place, United Theological College in Bangalore, but there was also the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Madras, where Nirmal was permitted to set up a separate department for *dalit* theology.[8] In Roman Catholic circles it is especially the Jesuits who are leading the way in drafting a *dalit* theology.[9] In recent years, a new ecumenical structure of *dalit* theology was achieved with the Centre of Dalit Studies (Theology), which opened in New Delhi in 2001 under the supervision of James Massey.

It was not for nothing that this separate dalit theology arose in the 1980s. In the previous decade in India, particularly in the state of Maharashtra, a broad *dalit* emancipation movement arose. For the first time literature from the *dalits* was published, attracting a great deal of attention.[10] And more radical *dalits* united in a militant protest movement with the threatening name of Dalit Panthers. The central theme in much of Christian theology in that period, i.e. the 1970s, was "liberation." The "black theology" that had arisen somewhat earlier had become popular among black theologians in North America and in Latin America many theologians had been captivated by liberation theology, linking up with a broader revolutionary revival. The Indian theologians devoted to the *dalits* fell back on this long-established liberation theology. The black theologian James Cone[11] was thus primarily quoted extensively in their works,

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[8] Among the theologians of the UTC who are researching *dalit* theology: M.E. Prabhakar, Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, S.K. Chatterji, John C.B. Webster and F.J. Balasundaram. At Gurukul in Madras V. Devasahayam and Jesudas M. Athyal should be mentioned.

[9] In addition to Lobo, there are also Anthony Raj, P. Arokiadoss, Jebamalai Raja, Sebastian Kappen, A. Maria Arul Raja and the economist M.R. Arulraja, who studied with the Jesuits.

[10] For example, Madhau Kondvilker, *Dagboek van een onaanraakbare* [Diary of an Untouchable] ('s-Hertogenbosch: Stichting Gezamenlijke Missiepubliciteit, 1986), a book written in Marathi, which was even translated from French into Dutch.

[11] M.E. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 415, 422; M.E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 47; William Madtha, "Dalit Theology," *Journal of Dharma* XVI (1991): 76; John

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but a large number of Latin American revolutionaries of various disciplines are quoted as well, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Paolo Freire, Leonardo Boff and Oscar Romero.[12] Where Latin American liberation theology and *dalit* theology are in agreement is the great significance attributed to the exodus motif. But there are differences as well: the caste issue is so specific that Indian theology is forced to go its own way.[13]

In line with American liberation theology, *dalit* theologians saw their work as a counter-movement. They reacted against the prevailing theological insights in their country and offered a revolutionary alternative, linking up with the struggle for liberation of the oppressed. Because of the *dalit* theologians, characterizations such as "counter-theology" (Nirmal), "counter ideology" (Devasahayam) or conflict model (Webster) were used. Thus, in the 1990s this theological movement was strongly experienced as being opposed to the interests of established ecclesiastical interests and traditional theological range of ideas. Now that *dalit* theologians are slowly gaining increasing recognition, also internationally, a shift is visible. Typical of this shift is Athyal's argument for a move from a "dialectic method" to a "more dialogical approach."[14] Moreover, in addition to the actual *dalit* theology, a separate type of theology has arisen in the tribal communities in recent years.[15] This *adivasi* theology is also a counter-movement but is less concerned with socio-polit-

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C.B. Webster, "From Indian Church to Indian Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 118-19; M. Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermenuetics," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 332.

[12] Madtha, "Dalit Theology," pp. 76 (Romero), 77 (Freire), 78-80 (Gutierrez), 85 (Boff); A.P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 141 (Boff); Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 412 (Boff); Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermeneutics," pp. 329 (Boff) and 330 (Gutierrez); Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 8/26 (Gutierrez).

[13] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 56.

[14] Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 13/26.

[15] Dieter Hecker, "Adivasi-Theologie," *Gossner Mission Information* (2003): 4.

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ical issues than it is with the issues of the relationship between humans and nature and the preservation of creation.

One fixed point in *dalit* theology is the major role given to biblical reflection.[16] A balance between Scripture and tradition as a source of knowledge of revelation was, of course, not to be expected. *Dalits* appeal to the Bible in a succinct protest against traditional representations in church and theology. By reading the Scriptures from the perspective of one's own experience with oppression, the good message would acquire a shape in a new way. For all *dalit* theologians, the figure of Jesus Christ is central. A number of aspects can be distinguished in this new understanding of Christ.

Faith in Jesus Liberates

The starting point of all *dalit* theology is that faith in Jesus Christ has liberating power. In connection with this, particular attention is paid to the position of *dalits* in society and the circumstances that were placed on their shoulders as a yoke during so many centuries. Prabhakar formulates this in a way that every *dalit* theologian would approve: "For the Indian Christian Dalits, to know Jesus Christ is to realise that the God of Jesus Christ will save them from inhumanity, social oppression, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation."[17] Belief in Christ is directly linked here to the battle for an improved existence for the oppressed in society. In Indian relationships, this is a new point of view, as can be demonstrated by a glance back in history.

In the nineteenth century, when the untouchables were still called *pariah*, they came into contact with Christian preachers. It was unusual in the circumstances at the time that there would be a message at all for the *pariahs*. A message of salvation was addressed to people who felt completely excluded. In addition, there was practical help in the form of education and medical care, provided by the missionaries. Large numbers of *pariah*

[16] M.R. Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit: Liberation Theology by Victims of Untouchability. An Indian Version of Apartheid* (Ameerpet: published by the author, 1996), p. 57.

[17] Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 409.

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communities converted en masse to Christianity. It was clear that not much would change in their position in relation to the high-caste Hindus. But it was already progress to be allowed within the Christian church. In the twentieth century, the *pariah* gradually became *harijan*. This term, which means "the child of God," was given to the untouchables by Mahatma Gandhi. Apparently, they were allowed to take a legitimate place within the Hindu caste society as well. Gandhi applied himself to changing the mentality of the high-caste Hindus, by which the situation of the untouchables would slowly improve. Ecclesiastical leaders adopted his ideas: Christian untouchables should also gradually receive more recognition from other church members. But when it proved that this change was occurring much slower than expected, the *harijan* became a *dalit*. Since the 1970s an awareness has been growing among the untouchables that they can obtain a legitimate position in society only if they take it. This required a different theology, and a different conception of Jesus Christ. In nineteenth-century missions, the redemption of the sinner was central, by which salvation was to be expected after the earthly life: Christ was primarily a redeemer for later. In the twentieth century the church in India paid much more attention to social circumstances. Lending help and care stood high on the list. Christ was the one who was there for all people and linked them to one another. Now, in the present *dalit* movement, the central issue is restoring rights that have been violated for centuries. Christ chose a side: he has become the ally of the oppressed.

These new insights found their way into the liturgy and preaching of the ecclesial communities. New liturgical texts were written that were intended to appeal to the *dalits* in particular during the gathering of the community. Thus a prayer, based on the Lord's prayer, reads as follows:

> Our God, who is near to and far away from us, glorified be your name in our everyday living. Your plans be executed in all our struggles as they were carried out in the exodus-event. Help us satisfy this day all our needs. Forgive us our being passive and indifferent members of this unjust social order. Allow us not into bondage of any sort, but set us free

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> from the state of being oppressed and exploited. For yours is the universe, all our lives, struggles and services. Amen.[18]

And a new liturgy for the celebration of the Lord's Supper describes how Christ is active in the sacrament in the following way:

> The broken bread, the broken body of Jesus, draws us towards the rejected, the hurt and the poor. In them, and through them too, our hearts are fed, often in a painful way. Let us also share in the pain of our crucified Savior and Lord.[19]

If, according to the old adage, the religious doctrine can be deduced from the contents of the prayer (*lex orandi lex credendi*), then these liturgical texts from the *dalit* circle are good witnesses to *dalit* theology.

Jesus is a Dalit

Why do *dalits* experience faith in Jesus Christ as liberating? One of their answers to this question would be: because he can be characterized as a *dalit*. *Dalit* theologians stress that in Jesus Christ God is connected in a special way with the oppressed, and therefore with the *dalits*. This is expressed very succinctly in the position that some *dalit* theologians take—that Jesus himself was a *dalit*.

The identification of one's own life with Jesus' goes unusually far here. It is not enough for *dalit* theologians to present an analogy along the following lines: just as Jesus sought out the poor in his day, so his message comes to the *dalits* today as well. But they explicitly put Jesus historically on the same level as *dalits*. Thus, some *dalit* theologians fall back on Jesus' genealogy, with which Matthew begins his gospel.[20] As is well known, in the long series of names of Jewish ancestors, there are also

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[18] Text from Paul S. Elisa, in: John C.B. Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, ISPCK Contextual Theological Education Series 8 (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1995), p. 123.

[19] Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, p. 121.

[20] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 65-66; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415.

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four names of non-Jewish women included: Tamar, Rachab, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba). *Dalit* theologians deduce from this that Jesus did not have a purely Jewish lineage. And being of "mixed caste" is one of the characteristics of the *dalits* (Prabhakar). The stories about licentious sexual behaviour that are linked to all these women add to the suggestion that Jesus' lineage bears *dalit* characteristics (Nirmal). Jesus can thus be reproached, just as *dalits* regularly are, for the fact that his ancestors did not observe regulations for purity. One may certainly doubt whether this is what Matthew intended with the prologue to his gospel.

It is not only the opening of the gospel according to Matthew that is used here as evidence. The birth of Jesus, as described by Luke at the beginning of his gospel, is also very significant for *dalit* theologians. Research shows that Christmas sermons on Luke 2 by *dalit* preachers have the tendency to make a clear link between Jesus' origins and the *dalits* of today.[21] Jesus' parents were poor wanderers and it is typical that their child was born in a filthy stall. The first witnesses to the birth were simple shepherds, and the child subsequently grew up in the "backward area" of Galilea (a typical term in connection with the social circumstances of *dalits*). From these few examples it becomes clear that the preachers were apparently searching for elements that would make Jesus a *dalit*. Jesus' descent from King David and the heavenly message that the birth would would bring joy to "all the people" is not cited. Webster comments ironically that if Jesus had been born rich, as Gautama Buddha was, it would have been bad news.

The first and most famous *dalit* theologian, Arvind Nirmal, goes farthest in identifying Jesus with the *dalits*. To him the meaning of the incarnation becomes clear only in the fact of Jesus' being a *dalit*: "His dalitness is the key to the mystery of his divine human unity."[22] Nirmal is thinking in particular of the way in which the Son of Man, along his path of suffering, becomes the victim of rejection, ridicule and scorn. Because the suffering and death are done to him by the established religious

[21] Webster analysed a number of sermons from the *dalit* perspective; see: Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, i.e. pp. 64-66.

[22] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 65.

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power, Christ becomes, on his path of suffering, the "prototype of all dalits."[23]

Thus the symbol of Jesus' being *dalit* is the cross. This is how Nirmal articulated it in his pioneering explanation of "shudra theology" and it is that idea that we often encounter in the writings of *dalit* theologians.[24] It is indeed a principal idea of Christian faith: the God of the people does not shun suffering. And it is very understandable that Christ, as the suffering one, appeals precisely to this population group which has had traumatic experiences of oppression, accumulated over centuries of injustice. In this way, God comes very close to the people, especially the *dalit*. Incidentally, for most *dalit* theologians, the meaning of the suffering of Christ seems to be the most profound here. Traditional ideas as to the effect of Christ's crucifixion has brought about have little meaning in this theology.

Jesus Proclaims Liberation

According to *dalit* theologians, the source of the effect that Jesus has on people is his own words. It is a message of liberation that is directed especially toward the poor and oppressed. Usually the most important example that *dalit* theologians grasp is the account of Jesus' first appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). Using a fashionable term, they refer to what Jesus says here as "the Nazareth Manifesto."[25] It all centres on the text from the book of Isaiah, which Jesus reads in the synagogue and proceeds to apply it to himself. Those prophetic words speak of the Spirit that rests on him and the charge entrusted to him by the Spirit. The charge opens with the words:

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[23] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 66-67.

[24] E.g. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-16; V. Devasahayam in a Biblical study on "The Cross as Countering the Caste Consciousness," in: V. Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 53-67; Madtha, "Dalit Theology," p. 83.

[25] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-15; D. Monikaraj, "Mission, Evangelism and Conversion," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 463; cf. Abraham P. Athyal, "Liberative Insights into the New Testament," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 321-25.

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"to preach good news to the poor" and continues somewhat later with "to release the oppressed." Understandably and correctly, *dalit* theologians have attached a particular meaning to these words. The message of Jesus encompasses good news for the poor and oppressed. Applying this to today, the *dalits*, of course, come into view.

The importance of this part of the Bible for the *dalits* is illustrated in an article by the prominent *dalit* theologian James Massey.[26] The article begins with the aforementioned text on the oppressed who receive freedom, but this text is cited in Hindi: "Daliton ko swatantrata pradan karun." The author does so, of course, so that the emphasis falls on the word *dalit*. In this way the charge that Jesus takes upon himself is connected even more closely to the *dalits* that Massey wishes to serve with his theology. In the Hindi translation of the Bible the Greek word for "oppressed" (*tethrausmenoi*) is translated by *dalit*. But there is another explanation for linking these prophetic texts with the lot of contemporary *dalits* in India: they are, after all, not only oppressed but also poor. The word "poor" at the beginning of the quotation from Isaiah could also refer to the *dalits*. William Madtha, strongly influenced by Latin American liberation theology, does just that when he writes: "Dalits are the anawim: the alienated, marginated, wretched of the earth."[27] By using the Hebrew word *anawim*, the entire Old Testament background on doing justice to the poor resounds. It is very convincing when Jesus' preaching is placed within the entirety of the biblical message. For that matter, not all *dalit* theologians are as strongly inclined to draw on the Old Testament in their theology.

There is no doubt that Jesus' message is intended for *dalits*. But is that all Jesus wants to say? For some *dalit* theologians, this is indeed the case. The radical Nirmal in particular writes straightforwardly that the liberation of which Jesus speaks is intended for *dalits* and not for non-*dalits*.[28] Like James Cone's

[26] James Massey, "Ingredients for a Dalit Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 145-50.

[27] Madtha, "Dalit Theology," p. 74.

[28] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67. Cf. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-15.

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"black theology" in relation to non-blacks, the only possibility this approach offers to non-*dalits* is that the liberation of the oppressed makes it impossible for the non-*dalits* to continue to oppress them. The radical *dalit* theologians have not always made themselves popular.

But their most important achievement has been the general acceptance of the position that the proclamation of Jesus Christ has to do with the concrete conditions in which people live. And if that proclamation is about liberation, then the problems of the *dalits*, of course, come into view. In this respect, the *dalit* theologians are concerned primarily with the liberation from injustice in the socio-economic area. The exploitation and oppression that the *dalits* have experienced have given occasion for searching for the words in the Gospel especially in which Jesus turns against injustice. But the *dalit* theologians are also concerned with liberation from the wrong forms of religion. The story about the cleansing of the temple is particularly appealing.[29] For *dalits*, whose ancestors were never permitted in the high-caste Hindu temples, the image of Jesus taking a whip to restore order in the temple is naturally an attractive picture.

Jesus Opposes Untouchability

Over against the temple tradition of the high-caste Hindus, the *dalits* had always held their own religion in honour. It was a religious subculture with its own holy places, its own rituals and, for the most part, its own gods. For the *dalits*, this religious-cultural uniqueness was also very important socially. In normal life, especially with regard to labour, they were continually confronted with their untouchability. They did not participate in life in the village proper where the high-caste Hindus lived, and they certainly did not participate in the world of the sacred, which the brahmans anxiously guarded. But this untouchability was not felt in their own circles. Here the *dalits* were among *dalits* and they could experience rituals in their own way without any restrictions. It is understandable that, for the most part, these rituals were of a communal nature. The togetherness was

[29] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 68-69; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, pp. 82-84.

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important in order to define themselves over against the dominant religious culture of the high-caste Hindus.

A fine example are the rituals of the *pulayas* in Kerala.[30] This is a very low caste that also displays tribal characteristics. They were seen as extraordinarily impure and treated as such by the members of the high castes. A *pulaya* had to move aside if a brahman approached and was not to come closer than twenty meters. Of course, the *pulayas* did not participate in the temple cult and other high-caste rituals in any way. But they had their own religious gatherings called *theyyam*. Drum music and dance played an important part in these celebrations, which lasted at least twenty-four hours. The *theyyam* was primarily a communally experienced ecstasy. The dancers would fall into a trance and the gods and spirits were thought to be present through them. The fast-paced music and lack of sleep enthralled the entire community and, as it were, raised it to a higher plane.

With this religious background, it is obvious that the communal rituals of the church have a special meaning for *dalits* who had become Christians. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is particularly important for them.[31] Here they experience the communality that they experienced earlier in their own religious subculture. And here is where the untouchability is broken through in a most penetrating way. After all, there is no stronger proof of ritual equality and mutual acknowledgement in Indian culture than in eating and drinking together.

If *dalits* form an image of Jesus Christ, then an important aspect of it will be his struggle against untouchability. Numerous stories in the Gospel have convinced the *dalits* that Jesus continually opposed the same purity laws used to discriminate against them. The communal meal is therefore the most striking symbol. *Dalit* theologians refer again and again to the meals in the Bible stories that Jesus shared with "tax collectors and sin-

[30] See J.J. Pallath, "Subaltern Christian Groups and the Crisis of Cultural Identity," *Journal of Dharma* XXIV (1991): 51-66.

[31] See also: George Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," *Jeevadhara* XXII (1992): 140-59.

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ners."[32] And the final "Lord's Supper," as the first occurrence of the on-going celebration of bread and wine in the churches, is viewed as being of the same nature as these revolutionary meals.

Perhaps the *dalit* theologians have an even stronger point in two other aspects of Jesus' life and work that are favourites among them. It concerns the attitude of Jesus toward the lepers and his contact with the Samaritans. It is indeed striking in the gospels that Jesus consciously breaks the purity laws in dealing with lepers. The *dalits* see a great deal of themselves in the position of the lepers. After all, lepers were forced to live outside of the cities and villages and were not allowed to approach healthy people (Luke 17:12), let alone have physical contact with them. Their exclusion had an emphatic cultic aspect; according to Mosaic law, a leper was even to warn those he encountered by calling out: "Unclean! Unclean!" (Leviticus 13:45). But the Gospel now relates how Jesus voluntarily touches a leper (Matthew 8:3). A *dalit* theologian concludes: "That is definitely good news to the Dalits."[33]

The Gospel stories about Jesus and the Samaritans similarly appeal to the *dalits*—and rightly so. The Samaritans were excluded from Israel because of their impure descent which made them ritually unclean. They were not allowed to take part in the temple cult either. Jesus holds the Samaritans up as an example for his listeners a number of times (Luke 10:25-67; 17:11-19). This fact already is striking as far as the *dalits* are concerned, but what they find very special is the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). Here Jesus asks a Samaritan woman if she will draw some water for him. The *dalits* can imagine only too well why this surprises the woman: this question as to the person from whom one may accept water is still a very sensitive point today in the relationship between those of high and low caste. *Dalit* theologians regard

[32] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 59.

[33] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 68.

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this act of Jesus as a crown witness for the thesis that he opposes untouchability.[34]

Jesus is a Revolutionary

There is an objection to equating the *dalits*' cause with the interests of those who were discriminated against in Jesus' time, such as lepers and Samaritans. Some *dalit* theologians have the tendency to place Jesus in opposition to his own people in a questionable way. They want to present Jesus as a revolutionary who leads the way in uncompromising resistance to social injustice and oppressive forms of religion. The Gospel does give occasion to link Jesus with working on behalf of the oppressed and excluded people. And, just like other liberation theologians, *dalit* theologians are right when they claim that little attention has been paid to this in church and theology.

But lepers and Samaritans cannot be equated with *dalits* in all respects and the orthodox Jews of Jesus' time cannot be identified with brahmans, however much one can point to similar characteristics. Arulraja, in particular, argues continally that Jesus takes up a position diametrically opposite to "the Jews" and rejects their entire tradition.[35] Jesus would have initially followed the Old Testament writings but, due to his growing experience in life as a labourer (!), would have increasingly begun to think for himself. Arulraja can thus do little with Jesus' statement that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). For Arulraja, this fulfilment then means that Jesus gives an entirely new direction to the Old Testament tradition: "Jesus preached revolutionary ideas going contrary to the dictates and interpretation of the Bible."[36] Here a narrow Marxist worldview emerges in combination with a misunderstanding of the Old Testament tradition that one sees more often in Roman Catholics writers in India. A better understanding for rooting Jesus in the Jewish prophetic

[34] Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, pp. 58, 117; Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 53.

[35] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, particularly chapter VI.

[36] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 96.

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tradition of the Old Testament just might sharpen Jesus' revolutionary characteristics!

Jesus Belongs in the Village

A final aspect of the conception of Jesus in *dalit* theology is connected with the contrast between city and country. The heart of church life and the practice of theology in India usually lies in the urban environment. The city was the place where the Europeans had control. The educational institutions of the missions are to be found in the cities, and the city is in the foreground with regard to the development of society, as well as with regard to theological issues of inculturation and dialogue.

But for dalits—and to a greater degree for *adivasis*—life occurs in the villages. "Rural India is the heartland of casteism and the primary context of the dehumanisation that Dalits experience."[37] When *dalits* imagine Jesus, they prefer to see him on his travels through the countryside of Israel. And then a name comes up that at least in *dalit* theology has acquired a special meaning: Galilee.

The *dalits* recognize something in the region where, according to the gospels, Jesus began his preaching: "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matthew 4:15). Apparently, the inhabitants of the area were poorly thought of. And it is precisely there that the message of liberation sounds for the first time. *Dalit* theologians are devoted to the idea of portraying Jesus as the preacher in "the marginalized Galilee." They present themselves as his audience, as the rural people who are despised by the urban elite of Judea. Here they can rightly appeal to the Jewish custom of referring to the illiterate as "the *am-ha-arez*—the people of the land."[38]

In this way Jesus enters the private life of the *dalit*. Apparently he does not belong to the unknown and feared urban environment but is at home in the villages. In recent years especially this notion has become more significant. After a decade of militant *dalit* theology with its accent on socio-political change,

[37] Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 21/26.

[38] M. Gnanavaram, "Eschatology In Dalit Perspective," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 480.

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a certain change in thinking could be observed around the year 2000. There is less thinking in terms of absolute conflicts of interests and more of a search for that where bridges can be constructed. And as far as the *dalits* are concerned, it is no longer only their history of suffering and oppression that is recalled but the values of their own subculture as well.

Village life seems to have something positive to offer as well from which the entire church in India can profit. This idea is also strongly supported by the new input from the tribal communities, which has become noticeable in theology in recent years.[39] The *adivasis* also have experience with neglect, contempt and oppression, but they want to contribute primarily positive elements for theological reflection from their specific cultural background. The connection with nature is central here, but the communal awareness that so qualifies life for *adivasis* also plays an important role. Furthermore, the biblical narratives are viewed in a distinct way from the perspective of their own religious background in which the world of the spirits is always near. And it is also important for the conception of Christ that the *adivasis* let their voice be heard.

When a new pope was inaugurated in 2005, a Jesuit father from India wrote an open letter. He pleaded in particular for the interests of the Christian *dalits* and *adivasis*. He explained how these sections of the population saw Jesus as one of them, someone who cried with them *and also danced with them*.[40] These words take us into the private lives of the villagers, especially those in the tribal areas. Here is where this most recent influence on theological issues is most clearly to be seen. The conception of Jesus in India continues to be filled in again and again in new ways.

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[39] Hecker, "Adivasi-Theologie."

[40] Francis Gonsalves, "Wilkommen, Welcome, Swagatham!" *National Catholic Reporter* 3 (2005): 5.

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