

Refoundation or a new beginning?

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WE CANNOT RE-FOUND SOMETHING which has not yet been really founded in the first place. This would be the reaction of some thinking and active Christians in many parts of Asia. The Church has been *transplanted* in Asia, more or less successfully, as a ready-made institution procuring salvation to the believers. It is far from being Asian, except in terms of the people who flock to the churches. Except in the Philippines, in the other countries of Asia the Church is perceived as foreign, often linked to the colonial period.

The demand for a national Church

Some months ago, the leader of a fundamentalist Hindu movement in India called on the Church in India to become a national Church. There was a chorus of protests from the Christians asserting that they were authentic Indians. There is no doubt about the Indianness of the Christians. But can the Church as an institution be considered Indian? The Hindus were quick to point to many official and non-official statements by Christians themselves calling for the Church to become more indigenous and inculturated, especially in the field of liturgy, theology, spirituality, etc. The Christian spokespersons accepted that their religious 'Head' is outside India. They could not deny their dependence on foreign funds, but only point to other organizations also receiving such financial support from abroad. Can we then really speak of the churches in Asia as local churches?

When can we say that a church is really founded in a particular place? One can well imagine a process somewhat as follows. The missionaries proclaim the Gospel to a group of people, translating it in the local language. The Bible is mostly a narrative of God's great deeds among God's chosen people. It is not too difficult to retell a story in another language. The proclamation of the Gospel also embodies a call to conversion, asking the people to turn to God, whose Kingdom is present among them, from their egoism and their slavery to the social (Satan) and personal (Mammon) powers of evil. The people listen to the good news, respond to God's call and turn to God. They express this response in their new way of life, worship and reflection, through their own language, symbols and cultures. They also come together as a new

community in mission proclaiming in its turn the good news. This is the way a new local church is born. This is probably the way in which the first Apostolic churches were born, giving rise to a variety of rites and churches: Greek, Syrian, Armenian, Latin, etc.

Indian Christians?

Unfortunately, this was not the process that was allowed to happen in the great missionary era, starting in the sixteenth century. Maybe the missionary enterprise was linked to the colonial one. Maybe the Church had become a self-defensive and closed institution under the attack from the Reformers. When the Portuguese converted some of the people on the Indian coasts, they had to become not only Christian, but also Portuguese, culturally and religiously. Roberto de Nobili in India (as Mateo Ricci in China) protested against this and asserted the right of the Indians to remain Indian culturally and socially, while becoming Christian religiously. While this was a step in the right direction, it was a half-way step. The Indian Christians lived in two worlds. They were Indians socially and culturally, but once they crossed the threshold of the Church, they became 'Latin Christians', further specified in terms of the European country from which the missionaries came. All the religious symbols and rituals were Latin-European. The language of the liturgy was Latin until the Second Vatican Council. The Church structures and theology were also imported. As an Indian theologian put it, a new Church was successfully *cloned* in an Asian country and culture.

Can we call this process *founding* a local church? Obviously the Church today at all levels does not think so. Everyone talks about the need for inculturation and indigenisation. Whether this is actually encouraged in any effective way is questionable. When the Asian bishops spoke about a rightful autonomy for the Asian churches to be themselves at the special Roman Synod for Asia their voices were successfully silenced. Today the Asianness of people's effort to live the gospel authentically in Asia has to be judged and approved by a central authority in Rome!

Fortunately, this is not the whole story. Side by side with the earnest efforts of the authorities to maintain the Latinness of the official Church, the people had their own way of localizing the Church. They evolved a flourishing popular religiosity. They maintained most of their key life-cycle rituals. These were Christianized with the addition of a cross or of a Christian prayer, but otherwise remained traditional, managed by traditional cultic specialists. They catered to their various

needs of wellbeing in life and health. They took care of the uncertainties of the crucial moments of life and social transitions. The people participated faithfully in the official rituals. But they completed them with their own. They built up flourishing popular devotions centred on Mary and other Saints. They created dramas, songs and narratives that gave expression to their faith during popular festivals. The official clergy variously condemned, ignored, tolerated or encouraged these popular practices. So we have the phenomenon of parallel religiosity. This is common also in Africa and Latin America, not to speak of some countries in Europe.

Do we need a re-foundation?

When we look at these phenomena, can we speak meaningfully today of the need for a re-foundation? My reaction is two-fold. First of all, one talks about re-founding the Church in areas where the cultures and peoples are increasingly secularized and dechristianized and the Church as an institution is losing its grip on the people, so to speak. There is a crisis of meaning and belonging. Whatever we may think about the way in which the Church has been established in Asia, they are not in this kind of crisis. We witnessed the living faith and power of the Christian people in the Philippines in unseating a president once again recently. In most other countries in Asia, their minority status is probably also responsible for their holding on to, and fervently practising, their religion. Their belonging is further strengthened as they face the attack of the forces of religious fundamentalism in India, Indonesia, Burma, etc. In such a situation, no one in Asia thinks of the need to re-found their churches in the way that this is discussed in Europe. We need not universalize a European problem.

My second reaction is that the churches in Asia do urgently need to become Asian in order to fulfil their prophetic mission in an authentic and relevant way. No one is going to listen to a prophetic voice if it is identified as 'foreign'. But as I had suggested earlier, this is not re-founding, but founding them at last, at least now, as authentic local churches. However, thinking about the process through which a local church emerges, which I have briefly outlined earlier, I wonder whether it can be described as 'founding'.

When I hear the word founding, I think of an organization or an institutional structure. Is the Church primarily an institution or a community? In the first place it is a community of people. This community may need an institutional structure for its smooth functioning. But its identity is not determined by the institution.

When the gospel interacts with different peoples, we can see new local churches emerging. Their institutional organization may be suggested by their own current social and organizational structures. But the local churches are not founded by someone, unless we refer to the person(s) bringing the gospel to them as a founder. The faith and praxis of the people are the foundations of the community. The institution is at the service of the community. Communities do need renewal and reform. They have to go back to their roots. But this process is managed by the people, not governed by an institution. One should speak of a new community being born: it emerges and grows. Therefore the term 'founding' may be inappropriate when applied to the Church. It gives an unnecessary institutional connotation to the process in question.

Is there a normative period?

Secondly, people who speak of re-founding suppose a first founding. They assume that the Church as an institution has been given certain credal, cultic and governing structures at its origin. These are said to have a normative character. One often claims them to have been divinely instituted. The task then is to return to these structures. That is why one speaks of re-founding. I have two problems concerning this way of looking at things. The Word of God has been communicated to us through the Bible, especially the New Testament and more particularly the Gospels. Every community in every age has to go back to these sources to rediscover the Word and respond to it creatively in its own situation. In doing so the community realizes that the Word of God, even the words of Jesus, have not come down to it *verbatim*. We have four Gospels which represent the way four communities have appropriated and lived the good news in their historical situation and tradition. The good news therefore has to be discovered through interpretation. Every community goes back in this way to the Word and responds to it through its own way of life conditioned by its history and culture. In this ongoing historical and creative process of interpretation and contextualization no one historical or cultural community can claim normativity. Every local church is in communion with other local churches both in space and time. There can be mutual learning, influence and enrichment. But no one local church need claim a normative character to its particular historical response.

My second problem is that contemporary European cultures trace their origins back to the Greco-Roman languages and cultural traditions. Even in this case, history is ongoing. While we should not

neglect our roots, we have to go forward and creatively and prophetically change with the times in a relevant manner rather than try to engage in 'restoration' and privilege one particular 'golden age'. Even in this future-orientated perspective, the European cultures may find it useful to look back to their roots. But I do not find any reason why groups of people belonging to the rich Asian cultures like the Chinese and the Indian should feel tied to the Greco-Roman roots of an ecclesial institution as normative. And yet this is what the present leadership in the Church is urging in season and out of season.

Is the Greco-Roman culture normative?

At the special Synod for Africa, a Vatican cardinal suggested that every African Christian must be a little Semitic, a little Greek, fully Roman and authentically African. One cannot simply permit oneself to smile at this vision of a hybrid reality, because this is the official policy imposed on everyone today. Cardinal Ratzinger addressing a group of Asian bishops representing national doctrinal commissions suggested that the word 'inculturation' must be substituted by the term 'inter-culturation'. Now there is a proper sense in which every encounter between the Gospel and a culture is also an encounter between two cultures because the Gospel does not come in some pure form, but embodied in one or other or some cultures. But what Ratzinger implied was that the Greco-Roman culture in which the Gospel first took form had a normative character and had to be adopted and translated in the various cultures of the world. This was not his personal opinion. A document of the Congregation for Divine Worship devoted to inculturation in the liturgy proposed that the unity of the Latin Rite must be preserved, though the Second Vatican Council in its document on the liturgy envisaged the birth of new Rites in the Church. Speaking again of inculturation in the post-synodal document *Ecclesia in Asia* John Paul II makes the same point. Once the Greco-Roman structures of the early Church become a normative reference point, inculturation becomes simply the translation in different cultures of the one and unique Roman Catholic Church, though a certain amount of external decoration can be envisaged to add local colour. From such a point of view, re-foundation means going back not merely to the Gospel, but to the early Greco-Roman Church as a 'foundational' reality. This is referred back to the will of Christ and of God and, for this reason, becomes immutable.

This means that the Church is condemned to be eternally foreign everywhere outside Europe. This denotes the end of any attempts at

authentic inculturation. The rich cultures of Asia are declared *a priori* unsuitable to express the Good News for their own people properly. We can now understand and even appreciate Asians like Gandhi who have declared their love for Christ, but have kept a distance from the Church as an institution. We can also see why the Church has taken no real roots in Asia.

Refoundation against inculturation?

But just as in the past the ordinary people gave birth to a popular church alongside the official Roman Church, today also there are some in Asia who try to meet the challenge of the Asian cultures and religions in a creative way. New theological perspectives for dialogue and collaboration are emerging when the Gospel is read in an inter-religious context. New forms of *sadhana* (spiritual practice) are being experimented upon. There is a quest for identity. People are demanding new patterns of responsiveness and accountability from those in authority. At this moment talk of re-founding may be perceived by them as a subtle way of scuttling their efforts to bring to birth authentic Asian churches.

Looking at Europe from this perspective an Asian sees the Christians there struggling with a similar problem. It is now widely acknowledged by sociologists that the process of secularization in Europe is much more anti-Church-institution than anti-God or anti-religion. The modern history of Europe has been a progressive affirmation of autonomy by social and cultural institutions from the domination of the Church. The weakening of the Church institution on the one hand and the disappearance of certain forms of popular religiosity owing to the advances in science and technology on the other hand deprived the people of authentic and acceptable forms of expressing their faith. This has led to a visible weakening of religious practice, though there is a spate of new religious movements of the 'new age' type. In such a situation what is needed is the possibility for the people to enter into dialogue with the Gospel in the context of their modern culture and evolve more relevant and authentic forms of self-expression. It would be unfortunate if the present period of uncertainty and unclarity led to a return to the clarity and certainty of the past under the form of re-foundation. That kind of clarity and certainty may be irrelevant and alienating today.

Not refoundation, but reform

In any case what we need today in Asia is not refoundation, but reform. We have no creative past to look back to, except at the popular level. The past of the churches in Europe is not our past. Popular religiosity itself needs to be recovered and integrated. But more than that we have to look at the present and at the future. Here the churches in Asia are facing many challenges. Some creative efforts to meet them are being made. These are caught up in the continuing tension between historical tradition and change. Some insights are emerging from these efforts. It may be of interest for us to look at them briefly. I shall limit my observations to five areas.

A participative Church

In many parts of India the Christian communities are not models of love and service. On the contrary there are a lot of conflicts between different groups of people divided by caste and language. There are ongoing tensions between the people and their priests, between the priests and their bishops and among the priests and religious. One may tend to see these problems as issues of authority and discipline. I think that what is behind these struggles is a desire for a participatory community, characterized by equality and fellowship. The Church in India had accepted the caste system. Its structures of discrimination and domination have also entered the Church structures, further strengthening the strong hierarchical tendencies already present there. The Dalits (the 'lowest' and the most oppressed group in the Indian caste system) and other dominated groups are rising up in revolt and demanding recognition and an end to discrimination. People in authority are often shocked by this. Their ideas of social order tend to look back to the feudal stage of society. What we need today are new forms of community organization where people will feel socially and 'politically' equal and responsible for themselves and authority will be seen as a service that is responsive and accountable to the people. Collegial structures do not function in the Church today at all levels. Even symbolic gestures of participation and consultation do not emerge from below, but are controlled from above. We are often told that the Church is not a democracy. This is true if we understand it as rule by a majority. But it is not an autocracy either. Unfortunately, even some existing community structures among the people are opposed in the name of Canon Law in order to assert the power of the hierarchical priesthood. This 'religious' power is often supported by economic,

social and even political power, when the majority of the people themselves are still poor and dependent.

Socializing the sacraments

The Church presents itself today as the 'sacrament' of salvation. In practice it seems to mean that it has the sacramental rituals that confer saving grace, irrespective of the circumstances of their celebration. So it becomes a cultic agent. People have a minimum of catechetical instruction. No radical moral demands are made. Conversion of heart and behaviour is preached but not insisted upon. Even when engaged in an active conflict in the village, people will be getting 'reconciled' to God sacramentally. The Eucharist will continue to be celebrated when caste discrimination and domination are being practised in the eucharistic assembly itself. It is therefore time that the sacraments were set back in their social context. The sacrament of reconciliation must conclude a sincere effort at making peace between contending individuals or groups. The Eucharist must celebrate an actual experience of mutual sharing and service. This also means that the sacramental celebrations must be de-ritualized. They must become social events whose Christian significance is highlighted by the sacramental symbol. This supposes a renewal of sacramental and liturgical theology.

Inter-religious dialogue and collaboration

India is a multi-religious country. The Church, as a group of the disciples of Jesus, is aware of its mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God. But this must be done with respect for the presence and action of the Spirit in the believers of other religions. Today the Church is unilateral in judging other religions as inadequate facilitators of salvation. The others however are no longer ready to be so categorized. This does give rise to tensions. Besides, the Christians also have to learn to live and collaborate as partners in a multi-religious society, without being a self-defensive minority group. It has to be present in the public space and take an active part in public life. The clerics need not be the only, nor even the main, face of the Christian community in public. Inter-religious dialogue and collaboration are ideals proposed in many official documents at and after the Second Vatican Council. But the Church has not really come to terms with inter-religious dialogue, which is still seen as a means of Church-extension. It cannot effectively play its prophetic role in society if it does not make its own the self-emptying, servant role of Jesus.

An Asian spirituality

Living among other religious traditions like Hinduism and Buddhism, the Christians in Asia are aware of different ways of God-experience. They have sought to learn from and integrate Asian methods of *sadhana* (spiritual practice), like the Hindu and Buddhist methods of contemplation and concentration. The psycho-physical techniques based on Yoga are also popular in handling stress and promoting personal integration. These methods contrast with the largely ritualistic and rational methods of prayer that have been imported as Christian. Some pioneers have even searched for a Hindu-Christian or a Buddhist-Christian experience of the Divine. Such efforts are currently marginalized and discouraged by the official Church. There may be some *Ashrams* where such efforts are being made. Even these seem to be going out of fashion, owing to lack of encouragement. No wonder then that the Christians in Asia are known more as social and educational workers than as spiritual persons in quest for the Divine or the Ultimate.

An emerging Asian theology

Asian Christians have tried to reflect on their faith experience in the context of their lives and struggles. The theology of the *Minjung* (people) in Korea, the theology of Struggle in the Philippines, Dalit theology in India and tribal and feminist theologies have arisen from the struggles of the people. Their experience of the different religions have lead Asian theologians to rethink many issues in christology and ecclesiology. These efforts have been looked at with suspicion and even condemned by the central authority in the Church. A desire for dialogue and mutual learning and correction in a Church that is a communion of local churches is quite normal and welcome. But the central imposition of a 'tradition' that does not take into account the new experiences of Christian communities in different parts of the world is not helpful. It will not block, but only marginalize, the questions and reflections of serious believers.

Rooting and growth

The Church is a pilgrim. As it keeps journeying towards its goal, it must keep looking forwards, not backwards. We must not be uprooted. But we have to keep growing and changing. In the context of Asia what we need is not re-foundation, but reform. In Asia this might involve a new beginning, not merely a renewal. The people need to be empowered and freed to respond creatively to the Gospel. Only then

will authentic and relevant local churches emerge, ready to play their prophetic role in the march of all peoples towards the Kingdom of God.

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