

# Dalit Theology and Forms of Dalit Liberation in India

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### Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed an explosion of study in the field of *Dalit* theology, in response to the perceived ineffectualness of classical Indian Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> The movement challenges the Hindu caste system and its subjugation of the Dalit community in India. The word ‘Dalit’ literally means ‘crushed’ and is a self-attributed expression of pride and resistive opposition on behalf of the Dalit community.<sup>2</sup> More than ever, abuses inflicted on India’s Dalits must be recognized. According to India’s official crime statistics, measured over the period of 2001 to 2005, “twenty-seven atrocities against Dalits are committed everyday; thirteen Dalits are murdered every week; five Dalit homes are burnt every week; six Dalits are kidnapped or abducted every week; three Dalit women are raped every day, eleven Dalits are beaten every day; and a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes.”<sup>3</sup> Approximately 185-200 million human beings, over one-sixth of India’s population, live the precarious, impoverished existence as India’s Dalits.<sup>4</sup>

The most powerful response within academic theology to Dalit oppression has been the emergence of a Christian Dalit theology. Broadly, the movement shares similarities with Latin American liberation theology, Black theology, and Feminist theology, not least because each movement advocates emancipation from classist, racial, or gender oppression. Yet Dalit theology

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<sup>1</sup> Sathianathan Clarke et al, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, “Viewing the Bible Through the Eyes and Ears of Subalterns in India,” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 10 (2002): 246.

<sup>3</sup> Clarke, *Dalit Theology*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> Clarke, “Viewing the Bible,” 246, 248; This doesn’t even include the *Adivāsi* tribal community, which numbers an additional 85 to 90 million.

is also unique among liberation theologies, both for the content of its protest and its methodology. Marxist class analysis, which was inextricably tied to the Latin American experience, plays no part in Dalit theology. Neither does the socio-economic category of ‘class’ in general. Unlike its predecessors, Dalit theology is unique in its rejection of the socio-religious caste system.<sup>5</sup>

Within any treatment of Dalit theology, one of the recurring themes regards the question of hermeneutics, and the applicability of textual, doctrinal orthodoxy to South Asian theologies. Until recently, Western academic approaches to Asian civilization were often coloured by an ‘Orientalist’ bias towards Eastern traditions. In the Indian context, Western scholarship has frequently relied on caste as a stable, essentialising marker of ‘Indianness.’<sup>6</sup> Within this sort of academic atmosphere, it is often assumed that Western models of Christian doctrinal orthodoxy are the paradigm for *all* Christian orthodoxy. From this inference, it is then asserted that Dalit theology, as a contextual theology noted for its markedly non-Western, ‘counter-theological’ perspective, diminishes the strength of ‘Orthodox’ Christian doctrine altogether. Is such a view tenable? Is a Dalit hermeneutic invalid because of its inherent conflict with ‘conventional’ doctrine? It is in this context that this study is situated.

Yet the problem posed is misleading because it does not account for cultural settings and the fact that orthodoxy itself is a product of its own cultural framework. Instead, as a contextual theology with a praxis-oriented hermeneutic, Dalit theology must be able to fully separate from conventional or Western theological categorization in order to flourish as a distinctly indigenous theological enterprise. Of course, more important than the question of indigenization *per se* is the

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<sup>5</sup> M. Gnanavaram, “‘Dalit Theology’ and the Parable of the Good Samaritan,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 50 (1993): 66-7.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew N. Schmalz, “A Bibliographic Essay on Hindu and Christian Dalit Religiosity,” *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 17 (2004), 1.

issue of resonance. Given that the vast majority of Dalit theologians are not Dalits themselves, by what right do they claim to speak on behalf of this entire caste of persons? Yet such an objection is unconvincing since it merely challenges the arguer's social standing while saying nothing about their argument. On the contrary, this essay will argue that an indigenized Dalit theology is necessary because of its *relevance* to the Dalit community. Dalit theology is not irrelevant but in fact represents an attempt to articulate principles *already affirmed by Dalit communities in practice*, principles that are underappreciated by conventional Westernized theologies. Such a view has been contentious among scholars and lay believers alike, and numerous contextual works have addressed the friction between *cultural* and *religious* categories within Dalit theology.<sup>7</sup> And yet, at its base, all theologies are culturally conditioned. It would be absurd to think that a Latin liberationist hermeneutic, which sprang from a specifically *Christian* milieu, could be simply transposed into India as a Dalit liberation theology.<sup>8</sup> Yet scholarly debate over the merits and extent to which a Dalit contextual theology has genuine relevance within the Dalit community has continued unabated.<sup>9</sup> While it is recognized that there are serious, scholarly divisions in this debate, this essay is not meant to criticize differing scholars but to show the direct relevance and applicability of Dalit theology to Dalit communities despite the fact that most Dalit theologians are not Dalits themselves.

The first section of this study will provide a critique of several dominant discourses, including Brahminical theology, Western methodologies, and certain missionizing approaches,

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<sup>7</sup> For two excellent examples of contextualized theological experiments, only one addressing India's Dalits, see M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) and Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Felix Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges: Doing Contextual Theology*, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002), 95-6.

<sup>9</sup> For a notable authority on the other side of the debate, see Paul G. Hilbert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) and *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

that have oppressed Dalit communities to date. The second section will show that, unlike Latin, Black or Feminist theologies, Dalit theology is faced with the real challenge of religious diversity, which makes an inter-faith dialogue through indigenized Dalit approaches essential. The final section will apply this Dalit praxiological hermeneutic onto two oft-used New Testament texts. These excerpts will appear more as small vignettes following the larger treatments of the first two sections, but the purpose is to glean examples of key convictions of Dalit theology that are relevant to the everyday realities of Dalit communities. Through each of these sections, this essay will demonstrate that Dalit theology is not merely an intellectual exercise confined to academia, but is a ‘living theology’ directly relevant to and representative of principles already affirmed in practice by Dalit communities, more so than what non-indigenous theologies could offer.

Before beginning this study, it is necessary to outline which interpretive schools of thought will be utilized. If it is not already clear, this essay will make use of broader currents of liberationist thought, instead of postcolonial theories. There are several reasons for this besides the more practical fact that it is difficult to successfully integrate both approaches into the same essay.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Dalit liberationist models, which at least profess to be ‘practically efficacious,’ identity-specific theologies which promote the active participation of ordinary Dalits in effecting change,<sup>11</sup> a postcolonial hermeneutic is distinct for its predominance in first world academia disconnected from Dalit praxis and ordinary Dalit agency.<sup>12</sup> It also seems that postcolonialism shares a number of attributes with the sort of Orientalist ‘grand narrative’ perspective described

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<sup>10</sup> Though R.S. Sugirtharajah has compiled an impressive scholarly repertoire that has tried to bridge these interpretive gaps, see especially *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Peniel Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 1.

<sup>12</sup> R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Still at the Margins: Biblical Scholarship Fifteen Years after ‘Voices from the Margin,’* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 22-4.

above, often overlooking complex local or national divides for broader international and global ones. Sathianathan Clarke writes, “Despite all the caveats that are built into the postcolonial biblical discourse, I find that ‘postcolonial’ is somewhat of a modern marker, which takes its multiple birthings from a common master narrative.”<sup>13</sup> By basing its foundations on a Eurocentric critique, positively, postcolonialism does justice by promoting an identity-specific posture recognizing victims of colonialism. However, such a globalizing discourse runs the risk of conveniently attributing all contemporary indigenous struggles to the shadowy hand of colonialism while ignoring local and domestic matters, particularly the existence of inter-Dalit conflict and violence.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the liberationist model makes practical results central, which is precisely what is necessary to make Dalit theology a relevant, applicable model to the Indian situation.

### Sources of Oppression

Peniel Rajkumar writes that the primary purpose of Dalit theology is to break down structural boundaries. This can only be accomplished if the hermeneutic of binarism and homogeneity, which is a key part of classical Indian theology, can be replaced with a more praxis-oriented dialogue with the non-Dalit “Other.”<sup>15</sup> It is here that the institutional Indian Church has failed in many ways to address Dalit sufferings. Despite the fact that roughly between two-thirds and three-quarters of Indian Christians are Dalits, their voice within the Church goes almost completely unheard. Consider these remarkable facts: “Though Dalit Christians make 65 per cent of the 10 million Christians in the South [of India], less than 4 per

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<sup>13</sup> Clarke, “Viewing the Bible,” 249.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>15</sup> Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 145, 171.

cent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests. There are no Dalits among thirteen Catholic Bishops of Tamilnadu or among the Vicars-general and rectors of seminaries and directors of social assistance centres.”<sup>16</sup> On par with these injustices is the fact that the Indian Church has failed to be a refuge for the marginalized. Though it has acted as a provider of the sorts of charitable, ‘band-aid’ solutions that bring temporary relief, it has not targeted the root causes of structural injustices – social, political, economic, and religious – that perpetuate Dalit oppression. This kind of ‘top-down’ strategy, which fosters dependency of the poor on the rich, is what liberationist Dalit theology seeks to correct, by making the Church a relevant institution and individual Dalits the agents for effecting their own change.<sup>17</sup>

In making Dalit theology a relevant, distinctly indigenous enterprise, directly applicable to its adherents and separate from high-caste and Western impositions, we must recognize the place that *textual* and *non-textual* hermeneutics play in Dalit theology.<sup>18</sup> This is best understood by quoting the oft-used maxim describing the Dalit use of the bible as “not to find out what the Bible says in itself, but to learn what it has to say about life.”<sup>19</sup> The entire approach Dalit theology takes towards the biblical text is markedly different from Western models, which privilege the written text and Christian tradition as the core objects of interpretation. At its most simple, this approach stems from Western Enlightenment ideals of rationalism and secularism which imagined literacy-based knowledge as eclipsing the kinds of myth-making wisdom prevalent in oral cultures such as South Asia.<sup>20</sup> Modern Western interpretive methods of

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<sup>16</sup> Botta, Alejandro F. and Andinach, Pablo R. *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberations*, Society of Biblical Literature (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 200, 210.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-10.

<sup>18</sup> In the following paragraphs, I will be making use of an excellent article outlining some of these key differences between European and Asian theologies. See Peter C. Phan, “Whose Experiences? Whose Interpretations? Contribution of Asian Theologies to Theological Epistemology,” 71 (2006): pp. 5-28.

<sup>19</sup> R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 216.

<sup>20</sup> Phan, “Whose Experiences?” 13-4, 19-20.

historical, literary, and cultural criticisms now treat the bible as any other human document. Yet this ‘demythologized,’ interpretive model, which treats the text as ‘out-there,’ subject to academic critique, is not the starting point of theology in India.<sup>21</sup>

On the contrary, Dalit theology engages everyday practice in a ‘bottom-up’ strategy that begins with the socio-political, economic, cultural, and religious conditions that oppress the Dalit community. By elevating the written text to the canonical source of truth, Western interpreters have, in a sense, made truth an intellectually elite pursuit, dependant on a culture of literacy.<sup>22</sup> Yet amongst Dalits, literacy is not a taken-for-granted commodity and literacy rates are significantly lower than amongst other Indian castes. Though somewhat outdated, the 1991 Census of India still reveals the disparity between national literacy levels: nationally, the literacy rate in India stood at 52.21 percent, while Dalits registered only 37.41 percent.<sup>23</sup> Much of this domination is deliberate; caste Hinduism only permits those ‘twice-born’ castes to learn Sanskrit, which discounted Sudras and Dalits from achieving literacy. Under this framework, Indian society is structured into four hierarchically ordered castes: The *Brahmins* (priests) sit at the top as the preservers of the eternal law of the Universe (*Dharma*), followed by the *Ksatriyas* (warriors), the *Vaisyas* (merchants), and lastly the *Sudras* (labourers). Beneath these four segments are thus the Dalits or ‘untouchables.’ Despite composing roughly sixteen percent of Indian society, the Dalits are shunned as something subhuman and do not even fit into the caste structure.<sup>24</sup> Ideologically, this structure flows from the foundational myth found in the Vedic text

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6, 9-11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>23</sup> Clarke, “Viewing the Bible,” 253, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 245.

Rig Veda X, which sanctions a systematically unequal human society based on the pattern embodied in the Divine One.<sup>25</sup>

More recently, cultural anthropologists have propounded several theories to explain the origins of caste discrimination. Mary Douglas, in her hugely influential study *Purity and Danger*, contended that the opposition between pure and impure is a universal phenomenon across cultures and is closely linked to boundary-reinforcement. She writes, “It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, without and against, that a semblance of order is created.”<sup>26</sup> Among Dalit caste-communities, ideas of purity continue to govern inter-caste interactions. For instance, Dalit communities are considered capable of polluting everything within 74 feet; hence they live in segregated communities outside of the main villages. Their shadow is believed to pollute well water, so they are denied use of village wells. When speaking to ‘caste people,’ they are customarily expected to cover their mouths with a small pot to avoid contagion.<sup>27</sup> Felix Wilfred, a Jesuit theologian and significant proponent of Dalit contextual theology, relates the story of how a young Dalit boy who accidentally made physical contact with a high caste Hindu at a movie theatre led to a bloodbath in a village in Andhra Pradesh, killing thirteen Dalits, in August, 1991.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, much of this purity-pollution caste discrimination has been enabled by the institutional Church and Western missionaries. As stated earlier, local Christian leadership remains overwhelmingly run by upper caste members, despite the fact that Dalits compose well

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<sup>25</sup> Sathianathan Clarke, “Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence: A Contest between Overpowering and Empowering Identities in Changing India,” *The Ecumenical Review* 54 (2002): 282.

<sup>26</sup> Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 7-9.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Felix Wilfred, *From Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity*, (Trichy: University of Madras, 1995), 103.

over half of all Christians in India.<sup>29</sup> Historically, the setting of Brahminical texts as the paradigm of Indian literacy and religiosity and their association with Biblical teachings was a frequent motif of missionary work. Nor did the missionary hermeneutic see any inconsistency with caste differences. Robert de Nobili himself stated that “the caste system as such was not unchristian,” and other missionaries have cited passages such as Matthew 5.17 to demonstrate that Jesus did not come to abolish social practices. The general fact that neither Jesus nor Paul were opposed to slavery (and caste discrimination was a sort of slavery) was proof enough for many missionaries that the Bible meant keeping the status quo.<sup>30</sup> Most directly applicable to the Dalits, the missionary hermeneutic presented the Hebrew God from the perspective of the Deuteronomic and Priestly writers of the Pentateuch, which portrayed Yahweh as upholding pollution-purity laws. Such a one-sided depiction did little to appeal to Dalits.

What is important to understand through this section is that due to this sort of benevolent dominance, Western hermeneutical models that failed to recognize a culture of illiteracy and overlooked oral traditions, together with an institutional, Westernized Church which frequently enabled these sorts of discriminative measures, has had the effect of obliterating the Dalit voice in their own destiny. Yet as an identity-specific, liberative hermeneutic, Dalit theology responds relevantly to these sources of domination, reflecting key convictions already held by Dalits themselves. Clarke’s suggestion that adopting new categories of discourse – what he calls ‘multimodal’ and ‘multimedia’ – that will remove the stigma of literacy and caste Hinduism is especially pertinent.<sup>31</sup> His advocacy of Dalit religious and cultural traditions in his seminal book, *Dalits and Christianity*, includes his criticism of ‘Sanskritization’ and his Christological reinterpretation of Jesus as drum. As an illiterate symbol of the collective experience of Dalits

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>30</sup> Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 230-2.

<sup>31</sup> Clarke, “Viewing the Bible,” 264-5.

toward the divine, this is a strong defence of the actual sufferings of subaltern peoples, including Dalits.<sup>32</sup>

## The Challenge of Religious Diversity

Unlike Latin, Black, and Feminist liberationist theologies, which often developed in historically Christian cultures, in India, Dalit Christian theology has had to contend with a situation of tremendous religious diversity. As this section will demonstrate, it is through engaging in inter-faith constructive dialogue that Dalit theology presents itself as a relevant tool for Dalit emancipation, an approach that the institutional and Western Church has been slow to acknowledge. Indeed, it has become a near dictum of modern postcolonial Asian biblical scholars such as M. Thomas Thangaraj and R.S. Sugirtharajah to approach interreligious dialogue under the assumption that the ‘totalitarian and totalizing claims’ of Christian biblical narratives are inadequate as the sole hermeneutic, but must incorporate other religious narratives. Yet this essay makes no such assertion.<sup>33</sup> This section argues that dialogue is relevant and *necessary* within the Indian context, something uniquely offered by Dalit theology; whether these interactions produce a multi-religious hermeneutic is a different question altogether, beyond the scope of this essay. It is enough to recognize that as postmodernists, religious pluralism is *a priori* their interpretive theological lens, with influential pluralists like John Hick in the background of much of their work.<sup>34</sup> The approach here is best stated thus: “The purpose of such reading is not to prove that the Christian Bible and the sacred scriptures of other religions are mutually compatible, nor to find linguistic and theological parallels between them for some

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<sup>32</sup> See Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*. See Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 46-9 for a helpful summary of Clarke’s main ideas.

<sup>33</sup> See Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru* and Sugirtharajah, *Still at the Margins*.

<sup>34</sup> See John Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*. See Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru* for a concise overview of Hick’s project in the book.

missiological intent, but to enlarge our understanding of both, to promote cross-cultural and cross-religious dialogue, to achieve a ‘wider intertextuality.’”<sup>35</sup>

Introducing an inter-religious dialogue within India is necessary for the simple fact that Dalits cut across religious affiliations and are not confined to one tradition. Wilfred powerfully captures the situation in India: “The texture of Indian life in all its aspects is so woven with the fibres of religious experiences and insights, that liberation in India is not possible without the resources of religious traditions, in spite of the ambiguous roles they have played in the past.”<sup>36</sup> Whereas Black Theology, for instance, was imbued in Christian songs and sermons and basically constituted a rereading of Christian sources under the new paradigm of God as liberator, this approach is not so straightforward in India.<sup>37</sup> Accepting a Western methodology would be to overlook the variety of cultural and religious traditions already present in India. Nor does it appear that Dalits are drawn to Christianity exclusively; on 3 November 2001, in an oft-cited nationally publicised event, approximately 60-70 000 Dalits converted to Buddhism.<sup>38</sup>

So if it is accepted that Dalit theology must dialogue with already-present cultural and religious traditions, the real question is how this should be undertaken, either through *inculturative* or *indigenized* approaches. George Soares-Prabhu, a Jesuit professor and ardent critic of inculturation, who also wrote numerous tracts against Bede Griffiths and the Catholic Ashram movement,<sup>39</sup> is perhaps best known for his collection of posthumous essays published in *The Dharma of Jesus*. The book is a classic description of liberationist praxis and particularly of the importance for an indigenized, inter-religious dialogue: “George’s originality consisted in

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<sup>35</sup> Peter C. Phan, “Whose Experiences? Whose Interpretations? Contribution of Asian Theologies to Theological Epistemology,” 71 (2006): 22-3.

<sup>36</sup> Wilfred, *On the Banks of the Ganges*, 97.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Clarke, “Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence,” 290. The movement had planned to bring one million Dalits together to convert to Buddhism that day, but was prevented by the *Hindutva* and other religious organizations.

<sup>39</sup> Schmalz, “A Bibliographic Essay,” 6.

working out the Dharma of Jesus for today in an India that is pluralistic and poverty-stricken... In a multireligious and multicultural Asia, it was imperative, he felt, that Jesus' Dharma be presented so that any person of good will would be able to understand and appropriate it."<sup>40</sup> For Soares-Prabhu, the essence of Jesus' mission was embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, a text accessible to any audience, irrespective of religious affiliation. With regard to Dalits, Soares-Prabhu used the framework of Jesus' table fellowship to depict the universalizing nature of the Christian message: "The very expression 'Christian *dalit*' is (like 'square circle') a contradiction in terms. The brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind, as Adolf Harnack correctly perceived, is of the 'essence of Christianity,' even if it does not exhaust that essence."<sup>41</sup>

It is important to recognize that any approach to Dalit theology in India must recognize the diversity of localized cultural traditions that are foreign to 'conventional' or Western Christian models. It is necessary to briefly outline some of them here to get a sense of the kinds of traditions already present in India, and the potential risks of uninformed Western theologies dismissing them as mere 'superstitions' rather than accumulated cultural traditions. One such custom regarded the proclivity of Subalterns to iconize material objects, so that when the bible was introduced by missionary activity, it came to be regarded as a sort of native talisman endowed with magical and mysterious powers.<sup>42</sup> Clarke captures this sense of awe when he recounts passing through a Dalit community and being asked to pray for a sick Hindu woman. As he prepared to open the scriptures to read, the family hastily informed him that this was unnecessary, as the members were neither Christian nor literate. Instead, they requested that he place the bible on her head. The sense of reverence and expectation by all present powerfully

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<sup>40</sup> George M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, (Orbis: SPCK, 2003), 3.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-93, 129.

<sup>42</sup> Clarke, "Viewing the Bible," 251.

conveys this magical quality.<sup>43</sup> Nor was this strong sense of the magical and spiritual world confined to the bible alone; the very real presence of a spiritual world and evil spirits occupying it is a significant feature of popular Dalit culture. Customs such as placing a piece of iron into the hands of a girl in puberty or a mother after giving birth clearly demonstrate the depth of these beliefs.<sup>44</sup> Of course, such beliefs seriously challenge the Western foundations of Enlightenment ‘rationality,’ which would be a non-issue if a more applicable Dalit model were used.

By dialoguing with other religions of India, Dalit theology also recognizes that, despite its present day relevance, the bible was also used as colonial object, imposed with little regard to indigenous cultures and traditions. Furthermore, the bible must be acknowledged as the product of a definite ideology, produced by a certain class of people. Though the Hebrew God undoubtedly cares for the poor and shows compassion for their suffering, it cannot be forgotten that the biblical texts on the poor were produced *on their behalf*, without consulting the poor themselves.<sup>45</sup> Inevitably, this setup presents the risk of a situation of dependency of the poor on the rich without offering real solutions to structural problems. Such recognition is not meant to demean the bible, but simply to show the dangers inherent in a Westernized approach to liberation that could be more effectively engaged through a more inclusive Dalit theology.

Though it is clear that the extent of religious diversity in India suggests a more direct, dialogical approach through theology, many Dalit theologians have inferred from this diversity that Christian proselytising is outdated and inappropriate to the Dalit situation. Felix Wilfred suggests a redefinition to Christian identity in the face of a pluralistic world, suggesting Christians see themselves as ‘becoming,’ not ‘being,’ given the apparent multiplicity of ‘ways’

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 251-2.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>45</sup> Alejandro, *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberations*, 208.

of encountering Christianity and following Christ.<sup>46</sup> Rajkumar suggests that Dalit praxis means ‘missionizing with,’ not ‘missionizing to’ and Christians must resist maximizing on social desperation to proselytise. This approach will avoid the hermeneutic of homogeneity and ‘theological ghettoization’ and promote a more inclusive theology that does not exclude the ‘Other’ while elevating oneself.<sup>47</sup> While it is clear that making material relief implicit on conversion is to abuse an already desperate situation, it does not seem to follow that religious pluralism must therefore invalidate all kinds of proselytism in all situations. Furthermore, what criterion is even used to describe ‘proselytism?’ By denying any kind of exclusivity of the Christian message in a multi-religious context, theologians such as Wilfred and Rajkumar risk reducing Christianity to a kind of Christian Peace Corps, whitewashing any exclusivist theological statements to simply a ‘feel good’ message, simplified to the Sermon on the Mount. As we have seen from this section, it is by engaging with the multitude of religious traditions present in India that Dalit theology can be a truly relevant movement for all Dalits in India, not discriminating relief with regards to religious heritage. Nonetheless, interreligious dialogue should not imply simplifying or theologically whitewashing certain traditions in the name of harmony or inclusivity. In the final section, this essay will apply the Dalit hermeneutic to two oft-cited New Testament texts to demonstrate how this praxis-oriented hermeneutic reinforces key Dalit convictions. The purpose here is not to provide an extensive exegesis, but to show how biblical texts can be made fully alive under a Dalit lens.

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<sup>46</sup> Felix Wilfred et al. *Being Christian*. (London: SCM Press, 2011), 61-5.

<sup>47</sup> Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation*, 163-5, 172-3.

## Dalit Theology and Biblical Texts

The first text to be discussed is the story of the woman who approaches Jesus to gain healing for her daughter, variously identified as a ‘Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin’ in Mark and ‘Canaanite’ in Matthew, found in 7.25-30 and 15.21-8, respectively. Initially, Jesus seems to harshly repudiate the woman’s pleas, but after her faithful reply he enthusiastically heals her daughter. Soares-Prabhu writes that Jesus’ response is not to be read as “a racist insult but as a provocative challenge to the woman’s faith.”<sup>48</sup> What is important to glean from the text is how Dalit exegetes have not just read the woman as clearly the defiled and unclean Dalit figure, but also how Jesus’ comparison to ‘dogs’ resonates loudly among Dalits who are often maliciously compared to stray dogs, less than human creatures that must be segregated from the household.<sup>49</sup> Less obviously, Dalit exegetes also demonstrate that faith in conjunction with human agency is the impetus that results in Jesus performing the healing. From a Dalit perspective, the passage reveals the power of ordinary Dalits to effect transformation on their own behalf through persistence and initiative.<sup>50</sup> The woman does not simply ask Jesus for a favour but in fact transgresses her own gender-prescribed status, refusing to defer to Jesus’ initial rebuff as one with a significantly higher honour status. Instead, she refuses to submit to her labelled identity as the impure ‘Other’ and persists in her request. Jesus, for his part, is a social ‘deviant,’ a deliberate transgressor of boundaries, allowing himself to listen to the presumptuous pleas of a social inferior.

Additionally, and more importantly, the story also shows Jesus to be a ‘teachable man’ who ‘lost’ an argument, and was persuaded to change his mind, by a person who was not only a

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<sup>48</sup> Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, 158.

<sup>49</sup> Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-5.

woman but also a foreigner.<sup>51</sup> In the Dalit context, the story powerfully challenges the notion of group boundaries. Jesus is seen as a social superior willing to learn from the ‘Other,’ not absolutize his initial views, and even re-imagine his own self-identity.<sup>52</sup> This is a stunning rebuttal to Western and high-caste theological approaches, often characterized by boundary-reinforcement and ‘Othering’ of Dalits and a provocative challenge for a more egalitarian theology directly relevant and applicable to Dalits themselves.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is another classic text frequently invoked by Dalit exegetes, reiterating some of the key points of the first text while offering other fresh insights. On the one hand, it is recognized that Samaritans are not nearly on social par with Dalits, and that they had significantly more political and economic power.<sup>53</sup> Yet the passage still offers valuable insights into social interactions with non-Dalits. Here, the choice of a priest, Levite, and Samaritan are significant, describing the traditional Palestinian division into blood groups.<sup>54</sup> Of course, the priest and Levite correspond to the Indian members of the Brahmin priestly caste. As we have seen, it was these caste members whose religiosity was the paradigm for all Indian literacy and religiosity, at the cost of marginalizing a distinct Dalit religion and culture. In the same way, the priest and the Levite’s representation of ritualism and purity-pollution boundaries explains why they did not stop to help the injured person. On the other hand, the Dalit (Samaritan), the person whose religiosity and culture is institutionally marginalized, the very embodiment of pollution and contagion, is the figure who does not hesitate to help a dying person – perhaps even a dead body, which opens up a whole new situation of pollution. Once again, the text is a provocative challenge to boundary-reinforced societies, and effectively

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 155-6, 159-61.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>53</sup> Gnanavaram, “‘Dalit Theology’ and the Parable of the Good Samaritan,” 75.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 77.

challenges social expectations about class, their failure to live up to their social and religious duties, and once again the role of Dalit initiative in transgressing social boundaries and reasserting their own agency to reformulate their self-identity.

## Conclusion

As this essay has demonstrated, Dalit theology is a necessary model for the Indian context not simply for its indigenized methodology in itself, but for its *resonance* amongst Dalit communities. Although most Dalit theologians are not in fact Dalits, this does little to undermine the substance of their theology. On the contrary, Dalit theology is not irrelevant but represents an attempt to articulate principles *already affirmed by Dalit communities in practice* that are habitually underappreciated by Western and high-caste theological models. As has been shown in the discussion of different domination discourses, the institutional Indian Church and Western missionaries, despite undoubtedly sincere motives, have often been the cause of much caste-reinforcement without initiating significant social change. Instead, these textual and literacy-based models are a direct affront to the oral traditions and non-literary culture that dominates South Asia. Only Dalit theology, with its praxis-oriented hermeneutic, gives proper weight to these deep cultural divides. The second section demonstrated the diverse religious milieu that any theology in India must contend with. Unlike other liberationist movements, which have developed in overwhelmingly Christian cultures, Dalits in India cut across different religious affiliations and Christianity represents only one of many religions. In such a situation, interreligious dialogue is inevitable and necessary, something Western theologies have been slower to recognize. Of course, dialogue does not imply religious harmonization, but stresses the need for religious dialogue as the essential precursor to any fruitful Christian theology; whatever

the final theological formulation will be is besides the point, but will simply demonstrate the need for a more receptive and applicable Dalit theology. In the final section, the Dalit hermeneutic was applied to two short Gospel texts, demonstrating that, through a specifically praxis-oriented hermeneutic, Dalit theology is able to extract valuable insights directly pertaining to Dalit self-identity amid social boundaries, which would remain hidden under a Western textual-critical hermeneutic. By recognizing that Dalit theology is in fact a reflection of convictions already held by Dalits themselves, the possibility remains for India to finally gain its 'own' theology, personalized to its specific religious and cultural setting, rather than through a well-meaning, though often inapplicable foreign imposition.

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