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Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation

Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities

PENIEL RAJKUMAR

Dalit theology anD Dalit liberation

In ful.lling the long-awaited need for a constructive and critical rethinking of Dalit theology this book offers and explores the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology in order to help redress the lacuna between Dalit theology and the social practice of the Indian Church. Peniel Rajkumar's starting point is that the growing influence of Dalit theology in academic circles is incompatible with the praxis of the Indian Church which continues to be passive in its attitude towards the oppression of the Dalits both within and outside the Church. The theological reasons for this lacuna between Dalit theology and the Church's praxis, Rajkumar suggests, lie in the content of Dalit theology, especially the biblical paradigms explored, which do not offer adequate scope for engagement in praxis.

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Preface

Indian Dalit theology has often, and with some justice, been compared with the Liberation Theology that came from Latin America, mainly in the 1960s to the 1990s. Both were emphatically concerned for the poor, the weak and the dispossessed. Both sought not just to analyse social situations but to transform situations of injustice and oppression in the light of the gospel, stressing that the true Church of j esus Christ should be an agency of liberation, and a place where the poor find at least small harbingers of a just and loving society, and the proper relations among human beings, anticipations of the Kingdom of God.

Liberation Theology operated in a distinct ideological climate that was much influenced by Marxism, and sought convergences between Marxism and a Christian practical theology which was profoundly committed to liberation. It also drew on Scripture, of course, and the theological tradition, but its critics saw it as making too many concessions to Marxism, and it is debateable how far the liberation theologians and the base communities made a significant contribution to actual social change ‘on the ground’.

The social and economic context of India is vastly different from that of Latin America for a variety of reasons, particularly the Indian social order dominated by the caste system. Dr Peniel is an excellent guide through the complexities of the caste system and its enduring potency in the India of today. The central concern of Dalit theology is with the Dalit people, who used to be called Untouchables, and who are still a vast number of poor, despised and underprivileged people. Many of them became Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but conversion did not significantly change their lowly position and Peniel shows that even in the Church they face a great deal of discrimination. Dalit Theology, he suggests, should be more proactive in its search for justice for Dalits, and more imaginative and responsible in its use of Scripture in the Dalit cause.

This is an important, relevant, and disturbing book. It should be widely read, and responded to.

Duncan B. Forrester

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I dedicate this book to the memory of my beloved Periappa, the late Rt Revd Mahimai Rufus, former Bishop in Vellore of the Church of South India, who through his life and work inspired and challenged me to work towards a world of justice, peace and equality not just for some but for all!

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Abbreviations

ARA	*Annual Review of Anthropology*
BTB	*Biblical Theology Bulletin*
BTESSC	Board of Theological Education of the Senate of Serampore College
BTF	*Bangalore Theological Forum*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CDSS	Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies
CISRS	Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society
CLS	Christian Literature Society
ExpTim	*Expository Times*
GLTCRI	Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
IJT	*Indian Journal of Theology*
ISPCK	Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
JAAR	*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*
JSNT	*Journal for the Study of the New Testament*
NIB	*The New Interpreter's Bible*
NTS	*New Testament Studies*
SATHRI	South Asia Theological Research Institute
VJTR	*Vidyajothi Journal of Theological Reflection*
WCC	World Council of Churches

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Introduction

Has Christian Dalit Theology contributed towards practical Dalit liberation? This question concerning what I call the 'practical efficacy' of Christian Dalit Theology (or Dalit Theology as it is popularly known) serves as the point of departure for this book. The issue of 'practical efficacy' is particularly pertinent for Christian Dalit theology, which professes to be an identity-specific theology of liberation and has as its primary locus the struggles for liberation of the Dalit communities who were formerly notoriously known as the 'untouchables'.

It needs to be emphasized that since its very inception Christian Dalit theology has been both consistent and candid about its practical dimensions. james Massey, one of the pioneers of Christian Dalit theology says that 'when Dalit theologians speak of Dalit Theology, they are in fact making an affirmation about the need for a theological expression which will help them in their search for daily bread and their struggle to overcome a situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy and denial of human dignity and identity'.[1] Similarly, another Dalit theologian, M.E. Prabhakar, understands Dalit theology as being, 'not only a prophetic theology for identification with the oppression of Dalits and their struggles for equality and justice', but also as 'a political theology for social action towards the transformation of injustice, undemocratic and oppressive structures'.[2] Therefore, the question of 'practical efficacy' is an important one for Dalit theology.

However, an answer to this question regarding the 'practical efficacy' of Christian Dalit theology seems more inclined towards the negative than the positive direction. Christianity in India in the twenty-first century is confronted with a paradoxical situation. On the one hand we have the growing academic influence of Christian Dalit theology as a form of contextual theology, whereas on the other we have the glaring discrimination of Dalits within Christianity as well as the continued passivity of the Church to engage in issues of Dalit liberation. This incompatibility in my opinion is symptomatic of the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology. Dalit theology does not seem to have significantly influenced the social practice of the Indian Church. As George Oommen reminds us, the Indian Church hasn't made many significant attempts to engage in struggles for Dalit emancipation, except 'defending the right to convert and looking after

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1 james Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997), p. 63.

2 M.E. Prabhakar, 'The Search for a Dalit Theology', in james Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (ISPCK), 1998) (pp. 201–13), p. 211.

Christian communal minority rights'.[3] The need of the hour is thus for a theology which will have a transformative influence. An international conference on Dalit theology held in Kolkata in January 2008 on the theme 'Dalit Theology in the 21st Century: Discordant Voices Discerning Pathways' recognized the need for Dalit theology to reinvent itself in order to become a theology of life for all. The need for a more practically efficacious theology becomes increasingly clear when we hear reports that, 'there is a real danger that even if caste is annihilated in Hindu society, it might continue to flourish among Indian Christians',[4] and that 'Christian communities in several parts of India show more feelings of caste exclusiveness and hold more tenaciously to undesirable caste customs' when compared to non-Christians.[5] Ironically at this point, what Dalit Marathi poet Baban Londhe says about the 'self-professed messiahs to the Dalits' in his poem *Shroud* seems to be true of Dalit theology as well. Londhe's poem for me seems to talk *of* and *at* Dalit Theology

> On a plain so vast our eyes could not reach
> They would make speeches to their hearts content
> and shout out novel slogans,
> blow a breath of hope on our over tired limbs.
> At times, to our shanty towns they would come,
> careful not to rumple their ironed clothes
> crossing over lanes and alleys,
> jumping across streaming gutters.
> When they stopped beside our doors
> we felt inexplicably moved.
> Viewing our pitiable state they would say
> 'Truly this needs a socio economic cultural change,
> the whole picture needs to be changed'.
> Then we would sing their songs
> in sonorous full-throated tones.
> Acting innocuous, they would eat
> the marrow of our bones.
> Days passed by.
> Darkness pressed from all sides.

---

[3] George Oommen, 'Majoritarian Nationalism and the Identity Politics of Dalits in Post-Independent India', in Joseph George (ed.), *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honour of Origen Vasantha Jathanna* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation (ATC) and the United Theological College (UTC), 2005) (pp. 338–50), pp. 339, 340.

[4] P. Dayanandan, 'Who Needs a Liberation Theology?', in *Dalit International News Letter*, Vol. 10, No. 1, February 2005 (pp. 7–9), p. 9.

[5] S.M. Michael, 'Cultural Studies and Theologizing on the Empowerment of Dalits in India', in James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (eds), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics* (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI and New Delhi: CDSS, 2005) (pp. 71–95), p. 88.

We battled against sunshine and rain
and like fools awaiting salvation
we have stood our ground
and are sunk to the neck in mire.
But now they say plans are worked out
for our salvation
covering our wasted tombs
in a new shroud
what munificence![6]

The task of this book is perceived as engaging with the challenge of ensuring that Dalit theology too doesn't remain, to borrow Londhe's language, just another *new shroud.* Therefore, an attempt is made to *bridge the gap* between thought and practice, which is identified by liberationist biblical scholar Norman K. Gottwald as one of the 'yawning chasms separating the several integral aspects of political and social hermeneutics'.[7] The book undertakes a critical investigation of the practical or praxiological dimension of Christian Dalit Theology, which will foreground a subsequent constructive process of discerning pathways through which Dalit theology can reinvent itself as a more practical theology of liberation and act as a catalyst in the process of transformation. Before we proceed to a fuller discussion of Dalit theology it is important to have an overview of the Dalit situation in India.

Who are the Dalits? – Dalits and the Indian Caste System

Once you're used to it
You never afterwards
feel anything;
your blood nevermore
congeals
nor flows
for wet mud has been slapped
over all your bones.
Once you're used to it
even the sorrow
that visits you
sometimes, in dreams,

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[6] Baban Londhe, 'Shroud'. Cited in Sanjay Paswan (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, Vol. 11 (Delhi: Kalpaz Publishers, 2002), p. 146. (Translated by Charudatta Bhagwat.)

[7] Gottwald, *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (New York: Orbis, 1983).

melts away, embarrassed.
Habit isn't used to breaking out
in feelings [8]

Understanding Dalits inevitably entails understanding the Indian caste system. This poem by Marathi poet F.M. Shinde poignantly brings out the hegemony of the Indian caste system, which encompasses a complex hierarchical ordering of social groups. In the Indian context, the word 'caste' can denote not only '*varna*' but also another concept called '*jati*'. The European term 'caste' conflates the indigenous concepts of *varna* and *jati*.[9] *Varna*, the term widely used to denote caste, can refer to 'a notional all-India fourfold division of society into estates based on function'.[10] The *vedas* (Hindu scriptures) divided the Hindu society in the post-vedic time into four categories or *varna*s. These *varna*s were associated with privileges as well as well-defined and particular social occupations. The four *varna*s were *Brahmin* (priest and teacher), *Kshatriya* (ruler and warrior), *Vaishya* (trader) and *Shudra* (servant).[11] *Jati*, the other term for caste, refers to 'named endogamous groups which are usually more or less localized or at least have a regional base'. According to Declan Quigley,'The sense of *Jati* is of those people who are in some fundamental way alike because of their common origins, and fundamentally different from those who do not share these origins'.[12] For the sake of methodological clarity it would suffice to recognize *jati* as referring to common origins or birth; while in the concept of *varna* the basic inherent idea is 'not of birth but of function' – a function deemed necessary to ensure the maintenance of

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[8] F.M. Shinde, 'Habit', in Arjun Dangle (ed.), *No Entry for the New Sun: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Poetry* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), p. 69. (Translated by Priya Adarkar.)

[9] Ursula M. Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 5, 6.

[10] Rebati Ballav Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society* (New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House, 1994), pp. 6 ff.

[11] A popular term that was used to denote the first three varnas were '*Dvijas*' or the 'twice-born'. The people belonging to the '*Dvijas*' were entitled to wearing the sacred thread and studying the *Vedas*, while the *Shudras* (the people of the fourth *varna*) did not posses any such rights. They were considered as slaves and the only right they had was to serve the three other 'higher' *varnas*. See Tripathy, *Dalits: A Sub-human Society*, pp. 6 ff.

[12] To try and explain the concept of *jati* a bit further, the words of One cannot choose one's jati; it is defined by birth. But one can choose whether one's jati refers to a more or less inclusive group: this is going to depend on context. In one context, one's jati is one's lineage; in another, it may be all the lineages with whom one can intermarry; in yet another, it may refer to those whose common ethnic or cultural heritage sets them apart from their neighbours. Declan Quigley, *The Interpretation of Caste* (Indian paperback edn), (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 4, 5.

social harmony and cosmic stability.[13] In everyday life, particularly in the villages, the operative conception of 'caste' is *jati* rather than *varna*.

'Dalits' are those communities which have for many centuries occupied a deeply ambiguous place within Indian society. As they are the communities that fall beyond the four-fold *varna* system their position is much inferior to the *Shudra*s, who are the lowest caste in the fourfold *varna* system. The Dalits are considered as the a*varna*s (casteless ones). Though the Dalits are accommodated in the local *jati* system in the villages, the Dalits are discriminated against in both the *varna* and the *jati* systems.[14] An oft-quoted passage describes the precarious existence of the Dalits as follows:

> More than one-sixth of India's population, some 160 million people, live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because of their rank as untouchables or Dalits – literally meaning 'broken' people – at the bottom of India's caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection. In what has been called 'hidden apartheid' entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. National legislations and constitutional protections serve only to mask the social realities of discrimination and violence faced by those living below the 'pollution line'.[15]

Theories of Caste Discrimination

Several theories have been propounded to understand the origins and practice of discrimination against the Dalits.[16] We will take a look at two of the most important theories.

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[13] Quigley, *Interpretation*, pp. 5 ff.

[14] This is primarily because the Hindu caste system, which has severe inequalities, is also 'marked by an organic unity among castes made possible through internalization of the in-egalitarian values, embodied in the twin concept of "*Karma*" and "*Dharma*" observed both by upper and lower castes'. This phenomenon was made possible by a 'peculiar complex system' called the '*Jajmani* system', which entailed the exchange of goods and services among various castes. But the negative impact of the system was that the Dalits always were placed on the wrong (exploited) side of exchange. They were always subservient to the other caste communities (*jatis*). They are denied access to the vital economic resources and do not have bargaining power. All this makes them the most exploited peripheral group in the Indian society. Tripathy, *Dalits*, pp. 13 ff.

[15] *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables'* (Human Rights Watch Report) (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), pp. 1, 2.

[16] For more, see Ghanshyam Shah, Harsh Mander et al. (eds), *Untouchability in Rural India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), pp. 23–31.

Aryan Theory for the Origins of Caste

Popularly known as the Aryan invasion theory, the Aryan theory is a racial theory. According to the 'standard view' of this theory, the present-day Dalits were the 'black race natives' like the Dasas and Dasyus who were conquered and enslaved by the 'white Sanskrit speaking Aryan invaders around BC 1,500.[17] 'Varna' or 'colour' is an important dividing category in this theory, which is supported through reference to ancient textual evidence like the Rig Veda.[18] According to this theory, the dissident indigenous groups, such as the *dasa/dasyus*, *rakshasa*, *asuras*, which did not submit to the hegemonic Aryan invaders were considered to be a threat to the Aryan way of life. Thus, they were hated constantly and attacked by the Aryans. Upon their eventual subjugation, they were excluded from the main economic activity of the time, assigned 'unskilled, unproductive, lowly and menial jobs', and treated with utter contempt and were segregated as a residual category of people to be employed as and when necessary'.[19] In opposition to this view, which argues for the 'immigrant Aryan position', there is an alternative view which argues for the 'indigenous Aryan position', claiming that the Aryans were identical with the people of the Indus civilization.[20] In spite of the ambivalence surrounding this Aryan debate, both versions of the Aryan theory have been appropriated by various groups to suit their political interests. Drawing attention to the appropriation of the Aryan theory by the Hindu fundamentalist groups like the Hindutva and Dalit reformers like jyotiba Phule, Romila Thapar shows how appropriation of the theories of Aryan race have not only sought to 'structure knowledge about the past, but perhaps more directly to give legitimacy to the conflicts of the present'.[21] For the Hindu fundamentalist groups like the Hindutva, which argue for an exclusively Hindu nationalistic version of Indianness, it is imperative that the Hindu Aryans be indigenous. This entails the denial of Aryan invasions. However, other anti-Brahmin Dalit movements like the *Adi-dravida*, *Adi-dharm* have adopted variant versions of the racial theory to break their bonds with Hinduism on racial grounds and formulate an autonomous identity as the original inhabitants of the land.[22] Both versions of the theory have legitimated the identity politics of the various communities which invoke them. However, the drawback with this theory is that though it gives us insights into the origins of caste-communities, it does not help us

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[17] Thomas R. Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005); also Shah, *Untouchability*, p. 23.

[18] Roweena Robinson, *Christians of India* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003).

[19] Prabhati Mukherjee, *Beyond the Four Varnas: The Unotuchables in India*, p. 104, cited in Shah, *Untouchability*, p. 24.

[20] Trautmann, *The Aryan Debate*, p. xiii.

[21] Romila Thapar, 'Some Appropriations of the Theory of Race Relating to the Beginnings of Indian History', in Trautmann (ed.), *The Aryan Debate* (pp. 106–28), p. 107

[22] Eva-Maria Hardtmann, *The Dalit Movement in India: Local Practices, Global Connections* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 58.

to analyse thoroughly the reasons for the continued practice of 'untouchability' and caste-based discrimination against the Dalits.

Purity and Pollution Theory

It is often argued that notions of purity and pollution constitute the foundations of the caste system in India. But how do we understand the interplay of notions of purity and pollution in the psyche of the people? In her phenomenal study *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas argues that purity is a concept which has been evoked to create a semblance of order in an inherently untidy, disorderly and chaotic reality. She says:

> I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.[23]

Douglas posits this opposition between the pure and impure as a universal phenomenon and goes on to explore how people's perceptions of danger and impurity arise. She contends that humans consider as dangerous all those that defy and threaten cognitive categories as well as those which don't fit into classificatory divisions, i.e. whatever is anomalous. Therefore, boundary-reinforcement is inextricably interlinked with notions of purity and pollution

Douglas also talks of a 'unity of experience' in any given culture where similar attitudes to boundaries prevail at three levels, namely the bodily boundaries, the social boundaries and the cosmological boundaries. Any society which is 'anxious about what goes in and out of the orifices of the bodily boundary … will probably also guard the social boundary carefully to protect who goes in and who goes out of their social group. Regarding the cosmological level of beliefs in such a society, one would expect to find a dualism with a distinct boundary separating the good from the evil, the holy from the unclean'.[24] In another schematic study, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology,* 1973, Douglas delineates a 'concordance between symbolic and social experience'. She talks of symbolic systems as having specific social functions like the symbolics of hierarchy for defining and reproducing social power; the symbolics of danger and taboo for demarcating groups and maintaining social boundaries; and symbolics of contagion for giving

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[23] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London/New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), p. 4.

[24] David Rhoads, 'Social Criticism: Crossing Boundaries', in janice Capel Anderson and Stephen D. Moore (eds), Mark and Method (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) (pp. 135–61), pp. 152, 153.

social meaning to the chaotic site of material things.[25] She talks of these symbolics as constituting the semiotics of social order. Nevertheless, she calls for critical perceptivity towards the codes of social semiotics:

> The elaborated code challenges its users to turn round on themselves and inspect their values …This would seem to be the only way to use our knowledge to free ourselves from the power of our own cosmology. No one would deliberately choose the elaborated code and the personal system who is aware of the seeds of alienation it contains.[26]

Douglas is critically aware of the dangers of these social codes which seek to forge order. She points out how pollution beliefs can be employed in 'a dialogue of claims and counter claims to status'.[27] It is this translation of notions of purity and pollution into the semiotics of hierarchy, exclusion and power which makes notions of purity and pollution problematic and questionable. This inter-linkage between notions of purity and pollution and hierarchical exclusion has often been argued to be foundational to the Indian caste system. Several scholars have posited notions of purity and pollution as a valid epistemological premise to understand the Indian caste context, especially in reference to the discrimination against the Dalits. At this point It would be pertinent to consider some of their arguments.

Celestin Bougle was the first social scientist to stress the importance of purity and pollution to understand caste in the Indian situation. According to Bougle, the caste system arose 'from the occurrence of spontaneous and collective tendencies' which lay at the sociological heart of caste and accounted for its 'spirit'.[28] They were 'repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization'. But the most critical aspect of these three tendencies was 'repulsion' — the word used to emphasize the importance of 'purity-pollution'. For Bougle, when we speak of caste reigning in a society we mean that 'the different groups of which that society is composed, repel each other rather than attract, that each retires within itself, makes every effort to prevent its members from contracting alliances or even from entering into relations with neighbours'. This is what Bougle calls the 'spirit of caste', which is instrumental for the empirical operation of caste. According to Bougle:

> Horror of misalliance, fear of impure contacts and repulsion of all those who are unrelated, such are the characteristic signs of this spirit. It seems to us that it is, as it were, designed to atomize the societies into which it penetrates; it divides them not merely into superimposed levels but into a multitude of opposed

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25 Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 70.

26 Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, p. 190.

27 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1966, p. 3.

28 Celestin Bougle, *Essays on the Caste System* (trans. by D.F. Pocock) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 60.

> fragments; it brings each of their elementary groups face to face, separated by mutual repulsion.[29]

The function of notions of purity and pollution for Bougle seems to revolve around maintaining cognitive groups in a hierarchy of hereditary occupation using the 'process' of mutual repulsion in day-to-day interaction.

It was the French anthropologist Louis Dumont who developed the purity and pollution ideology into a systemic and coherent thesis. Dumont reduced the three tendencies of caste elucidated by Bougle to a 'single true principle' — the opposition of the pure and the impure in his seminal work *Homo Hierarchicus*.[30] Dumont argues for understanding Hindu caste society in holistic or structural terms. Caste, for Dumont, is little more than the working out of the complementary opposition between the pure and the impure on a substantive level.[31] 'Superiority and superior purity are identical: it is in this sense that, ideologically, distinction of purity is the foundation of status.'[32] Though Dumont recognizes that there is a great polyvocality and variation in the manner in which the opposition of purity and pollution is expressed in caste relations, he maintains that this ideological opposition predominantly permeates the system. He does not 'claim that the opposition between pure and impure is the "foundation" of society except in the intellectual sense of the term'. Rather, 'it is by implicit reference to this opposition that the society of castes appears consistent and rational to those who live in it'.[33] Dumont's argument seems to be pointing suggestively to the fact that notions of purity and pollution became referential for the behaviour and interaction of the caste groups. We find this clearly expressed by Mary Douglas, who while introducing *Homo Hierarchicus* writes:

> (t)he idiom of purity is only too well known to us. It is liable to dominate our transactions with one another whenever other kinds of social distinction, based on authority and wealth are not clear. Purity and impurity are principles of evaluation and separation. The purer must be kept uncontaminated by the less pure.[34]

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29 Bougle, *Essays*, p. 9.

30 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (London: Paladdin, 1972).

31 R.L. Stirrat, 'Caste Conundrums: Views of Caste in a Sinhalese Catholic Fishing Village', in Dennis B. McGilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, Cambridge Papers in Social Anthropology, No. 9, General Editor jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) (pp. 8–33), p. 12.

32 Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, p. 56.

33 Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 44.

34 Mary Douglas, 'Introduction', in *Homo Hierarchicus*, p. 16.

In particular, Dumont's work has been seminal in the magnitude of sustained intellectual debate it has evoked. His intention was to organize the myriad complexity of caste manifestations into a systemic set of structural principles. However, Dumont's theory has evoked much criticism, knowledge of which is pertinent for a broader understanding of caste. Dumont's theory about the ideology of caste has been thought to be flawed by critics like Quigley who claim that this argument is soaked through with pre-conceptual notions of Hindu society.[35] According to Berreman, Dumont's view of the caste system is in close conformity, 'to the high caste ideal of what the caste system of Hindu India ought to be like according to those who value it positively: it conforms well to the theory of caste purveyed by learned *Brahmin*ical tracts'.[36] Berreman also argues that Dumont's theory 'bears little relationship to the experience of caste in the lives of many millions who live it in India, or to the feeble reflections of those lives that have made their way into the ethnographical, biographical and novelistic literature' and insists this to be a travesty, which could become clear upon a frank talk with an untouchable.[37] A few field studies have demonstrated how certain groups do not accept the principle of hierarchy which is delineated by Dumont.[38]

It is important that Dumont's theory of purity and pollution should also be analysed in the light of the several ambivalences and inconsistencies that prevail when it comes to the dynamics of caste operation in India. One of the problems associated with Dumont's thesis is the problem of ascertaining definite rank of an individual caste group on an all-India basis. Dennis B. McGilvary draws our attention to what he calls the 'pragmatic and historically contingent polyvocality' of caste interaction and elaborates this issue further:

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35 Quigley, *Interpretation*, p. 2.

36 Gerald Berreman, 'The Brahmanical View of Caste', in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.), Vol. 5, 1971 (pp. 16–23), p. 23.

37 Gerald Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities* (Meerut: Folklore Institute, 1979), p. 162.

38 Andre Beteille, *Society and Politics in India: Essays in a Comparative Perspective* (London: Athlone Press, 1991). Parry's study of the MahaBrahmins or the funeral priests of Benares provides insights to understand priests as vessels of impurity and defilement, who through rituals and acceptance of ritual gifts carry on themselves the pollution of their patrons. j.P. Parry, 'Ghosts, Greed and the Sin: The Occupational Identity of the Benares Funeral Priests', in *Man* (n.s.), Vol. 15, 1980 (pp. 88–111), and j.P. Parry, 'The Gift, the Indian Gift and the "Indian Gift"', in *Man* (n.s.), Vol. 21, 1986 (pp. 453–73). Raheja also agrees with the idea of potential pollution through gift-acceptance. G.G. Raheja, *The Poison in the Gift: Ritual Prestation, and the Dominant Caste in a North Indian Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). See also j.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, chapter on 'Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer' (pp. 26–44) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and G.G. Raheja, 'India: Caste, Kingship and Dominance Reconsidered', in *ARA*, Vol. 17, 1988 (pp. 497–522), p. 517 for other discussions.

> The constellation of behavioural traits commonly identified with the operation of local caste hierarchies, including asymmetrical inter-caste transactions in food and drink, asymmetrical removal of waste, caste endogamy or hypergamy, differential access to domestic and public space…can be surprisingly versatile and polyvocal markers of social rank. While they unambiguously convey assertions of relative superiority and inferiority – and this is clearly their intent – they do not unambiguously express the dimension or aspect of social rank which is being claimed.[39]

According to anthropologist M.N. Srinivas, though differences exists 'between the various regions and castes in the strictness and elaborateness of the rules regarding pollution and purity', ideas of purity and pollution 'cover a large sector of life. Inter-caste relations are governed at many points by ideas of pollution'.[40] This is precisely because, as Taya Zankin says, that though in short 'who pollutes, and when it pollutes are all highly variable … all that can be said is that the *people immediately concerned know the rules* through tradition and custom and they are too familiar with them to be bothered by their inconsistency'.[41]

The other criticism that has been levelled against Dumont is that there is no general acceptance of notions of purity and pollution as having ascriptive social value. Gerald Berreman repeatedly draws attention to the fact that 'low caste people' do not accept the unclean and demeaning status assigned to them.[42] According to Ursula Sharma's summary of Berreman's argument, people belonging to the 'low castes' had their own definitions for the caste situation and did not subscribe to Dumont's 'ideological celebration of hierarchy based on principles of purity and pollution'. The diverse notions of the 'how' and 'why' of the development of the caste system which prevail among the 'low castes' hinge more on reference to superior *power* of the high castes rather than superior *purity*. More often than not, having been left with no other option than to risk being beaten up or face deprivation of their livelihood, the 'lower castes' cope with their assigned inferior and unclean status. As coping mechanisms they elaborate their own myths and ideologies in which their own caste is portrayed as being displaced from the high status that it was 'really' entitled to. Usually this displacement is interpreted as resulting from the deceit of high castes or by way of quirk of fate or sheer misfortune.[43] Berreman's main contention was that because the 'higher castes' wielded considerable economic power over the 'low castes' the latter couldn't

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39 McGilvary (ed.), *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, p. 5.

40 M.N. Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India and Other Essays* (London: j.K. Publishers, 1962), p. 151. Emphasis mine.

41 Taya Zankin, *Caste Today* (London: Institute of Race Relations/Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 18.

42 See Berreman, *Caste and Other Inequalities*.

43 Ursula M. Sharma, 'Berreman Revisited; Caste and the Comparative Method', in Mary Searle-Chatterjee and Ursula M. Sharma (eds), *Contextualising Caste: Post-*

openly resist or express their resentment towards the polluted position ascribed to them.[44] However, he stressed the fact that ascriptive status on the basis of relative purity or pollution did not gain acceptance among the 'lower-castes' and was resented strongly.

Though some 'low castes' do not often accept the impure status assigned to them this is not evidence by itself to prove that they don't believe in notions of purity and pollution at all. In fact, such people who resent being considered 'impure' themselves often resort to claiming superiority over other 'lower-castes', using the ideology of purity and pollution, though not in the same way as the caste communities. Taya Zinkin reports his 'first contact with untouchability within Untouchability' when he was mobbed by Chamars when he persuaded a Dom to draw water from their well.[45] Moffat's ethnographic study in the South Indian village of *Endavur* contains echoings along similar lines.[46] Moffat points out to an interesting 'sub-system' among the Dalits, which seems to be a reciprocation of the hierarchical ranking found in the caste system. According to Moffatt, 'at the deeper level of Indian village culture so conceptualized, Untouchables and higher-caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs'.[47] Moffat's interpretation is that Dalits and other 'low castes' have recreated the functions and relations from which they themselves have been excluded in the macro-caste system. Berreman's studies in *Sirkanda* village in Uttar Pradesh contains reports of blacksmiths resenting being treated as 'untouchables' on par with the others because unlike the others they refrain from eating the flesh of buffaloes and cattle.[48] Similarly, Unnithan-Kumar's study in Rajasthan among the *Girasia* tribe also reports how the *Girasia* claim superior status over the 'tribal' Bhils, citing one of the reasons for the latter's impure status as involving eating the flesh of the domestic buffalo.[49] Moffat's study in South India also contains such reports where pork- and beef-eating groups claimed superior status over frog-eating groups.[50] Sharma also points out that citing of impure occupations like tanning and scavenging to justify the low status of certain castes is very much a probability. These evidences suggest that 'lower caste' people do use the notions of purity and pollution to differentiate themselves from the other 'lower castes'. However, it needs to be emphasized

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Dumontian Approaches (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers/Sociological Review, 1994) (pp. 73–91), pp. 73 ff.

[44] Gerald Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1963), pp. 224 ff.

[45] Zinkin, *Caste Today*, p. 8.

[46] M. Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India* (Princeton, New jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 290 ff.

[47] Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 291.

[48] Berreman, *Hindus of the Himalayas*, p. 221.

[49] M. Unnithan-Kumar, *Identity, Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), p. 87.

[50] Moffat, *An Untouchable Community*, p. 130.

that *possible similarities in the manner in which both 'upper castes' and the 'lower castes' employ notions of purity and pollution to discriminate others does not necessarily imply the same thing always*. On the basis of the analysis of the above-mentioned factors I conclude that the operation of notions of purity and pollution among the 'lower-castes' is premised in the context of a dialectic tension between 'resistance to' and strategic 'utilization of' these notions in a fascinating interplay of claims and counterclaims to status. This purity and pollution ideology is employed by caste groups when they claim superior status over other parallel groups and vehemently resisted when used to emphasize their own inferiority on the perpendicular level. However, the point that is important is that notions of purity and pollution are an important idiom employed in caste interactions especially in negotiating status.

Sometimes notions of purity and pollution can also be discerned in what is claimed to be social convention. Based on her fieldwork in *Aruloor* in Tamil Nadu, K. Kapadia argues that sometimes interest in notions of purity and pollution is more to stake claim to social status than anything fundamental. She argues that 'upper caste' people in *Aruloor* conformed to purity regulations in the interests of maintaining collective caste status whereas there was a great deal of personal cynicism towards the strictures demanded by the rules of purity and pollution. Kapadia interprets this cynicism as being best reflected (though secretively) in their meat eating and indulging in affairs with 'low caste women'. The upper caste men of *Aruloor* claimed ritual purity in public though their actual behaviour conflicted with the conventional social behaviour prescribed for them. Kapadia also points to the cynical attitude of the *Pallars* ('low caste' group) of *Aruloor* towards 'upper caste' claims to ritual superiority. They firmly rejected the ritual impurity imposed on them by the 'upper castes'. Moreover, the *Pallars* treated other 'low castes' like barbers and washermen as being ritually inferior to them. Kapadia argues, that this 'is not evidence of any fundamental interest in ritual purity. On the contrary, this has much to do with making a claim to social status. The *Pallars* are merely treating their service castes in exactly the same way as other castes treat theirs. They are following conventional social behavior'.[51]

Certain processes of achieving upward social mobility, like the process of 'sanskritization' conceptualized by Srinivas, also borrow heavily from the distinctions between the pure and impure. Through the process of sanskritization, a 'lower caste' 'was able, in a generation of two, to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the *Brahmin*s'.[52] Therefore, we see that the idiom of purity and pollution is not only used by the 'lower castes' to assert superior status over other 'lower

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[51] K. Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters: Gender, Caste and Class in Rural South India* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 117, 118.

[52] M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1952), p. 32.

castes'; rather it is also used in renegotiating one's social status and to achieve upward social mobility by adhering to practices and rituals considered superior or relatively pure.[53] Thus, we can state with conviction that notions of purity and pollution and assertion of superiority are intrinsically interlinked to a large extent in India's caste interaction and operation.

Weakening of Notions of Purity and Pollution in the Contemporary Context

Though it is predominantly presumed that the caste system is based on notions of purity and pollution we need to take note that notions of purity and pollution have an enigmatic presence in the changing Indian society today. As early as 1962 Srinivas pointed to the weakening of ideas of purity and pollution which effected changes in the caste system when even villages 'experienced a certain amount of liberalization'. For Srinivas, 'this process has, however, been accompanied by the greater activity of caste in administration and politics. Adult franchise and Panchayat Raj have provided new opportunities for castes. In the course of exploitation of new opportunities, the caste system has undergone a certain amount of change'.[54] In relation to this argument about the transitory nature of caste we can raise the issue of the pertinence of thinking about caste in terms of notions of purity and pollution. Ursula Sharma is right when she points out that while the force of some ritual prohibition based on notions of purity and pollution has now weakened other restrictions have proved very difficult to be maintained 'in the crowded urban context where the caste of the person who sits in the next seat in train or bus or who serves in the tea shop may be impossible to ascertain'.[55] However, Sharma goes on to make it clear that 'in spite of the decline in practice of ritual restrictions, the vocabulary of ritual purity and pollution still provides one language for talking about caste'.[56] This language could be used as an important idiom of social interaction not to justify the entire caste system but at least for discussing the relative status of specific local castes.[57]

It needs to be emphasized that with regard to any discussion about the changing nature of caste we should be cautious about statements which 'border on fiction' when it comes to accenting the changes that are under way in Indian society, like the following statement by M.V. Nadkarni:

> Ritual hierarchy and pollution have completely vanished from urban areas. Even in the rural areas they have considerably weakened. The j ajmani system, which allotted duties and also gave some security and was the main factor behind the

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[53] However, it needs to be mentioned that there is no evidence of the sanskritization process being effective in changing the status of the Dalit communities.

[54] Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India*, p. 5.

[55] Sharma, *Caste* (Buckingham/Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999), pp. 36–7.

[56] Sharma, *Caste*, pp. 36–7.

[57] Sharma, *Caste*, pp. 36–7.

> continuation of the caste system all these centuries in spite of the progressive teaching by many Hindu saints and philosophers has now broken down.[58]

Responding to this, jesuit theologian Felix Wilfred rightly reminds us of the dangers of such statements which hide the 'actual situation of oppression, deprivation, disempowerment and violence the Dalits continue to suffer'. Representing the Dalit situation in the manner in which Nadkarni does, 'is not so innocent' according to Wilfred, but 'has serious consequences' as such a portrayal can actually lull a large section of the so-called middle and upper castes into complacency. Further, such a picture also 'blinds them to the actual struggles and conflicts the Dalits are going through to secure their dignity and respectability against many odds'.[59]

Dalits and Notions of Purity and Pollution

If we move from a general conceptualization of caste-relations between the various 'caste-communities' to the specific context of Dalit discrimination, one cannot denounce the fact that 'ideas of purity, whether occupational or ceremonial, which are found to be a factor in the genesis of caste, are the very soul of the idea and practice of untouchability'.[60] In spite of the increasing 'class-ification' of caste, notions of purity and pollution operate ubiquitously in the discrimination of the Dalit communities, assuming various operative hues.

The Dalit communities are considered capable of polluting everything within the range of 74 feet. Their shadow is believed to pollute wellwater, so they are denied access to the village wells. They had to cover their mouth with a little pot when speaking with 'caste people'.[61] To avoid physical contagion, usually the Dalits live in segregated areas outside the main villages. In Tamil Nadu their living areas are called '*para cheris*'. This siting of the *para cheris* away from the main village (*oor*) accentuates the social exclusion of the Dalit communities rather than their social identity with the village.[62] Fah-hian, writing about the *Candalas* (a Dalit *jati* of North India), states, 'they live segregated from the rest of the society,

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58 M.V. Nadkarni, 'Ethics and Relevance of Conversions: A Critical Assessment of Religious and Social Dimension in a Gandhian Perspective', in *Economic and Political Weekly'*, january 18 2003, p. 231. Cited in Felix Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment* (Bangalore: NBCLC, 2007), p. 13

59 Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, p. 13.

60 G.S. Ghurye, *Caste, Class and Occupation* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1961), p. 214.

61 james Elisha, 'Liberative Motifs in the Dalit Religion', in *BTF*, Vol. 34, No. 2, December, 2002 (pp. 78–88), pp. 78 ff.

62 Andre Beteille, *Castes: Old and New, Essays in Social Structure and Social Stratification* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1969), p. 36.

and when they enter a city, they must sound an alarm by striking a piece of wood to warn everyone of their presence and enable the citizens to avoid running into them'.[63] The Dharmasutras make it clear that direct or indirect contact with the Dalits can cause pollution. Pollution would occur if the Dalits are touched, conversed with or even looked upon. Rites of purification become mandatory after such pollution. The *Jatakas* (ancient Indian fables) contain tales of the daughters of a *Brahmin* and a *Vysya* washing their eyes after having looked at a *Candala*; and a starved *Brahmin* who dies from embarrassment after having eaten food left by a *Candala*.[64] Not only were the Dalits deemed polluting but the people who came into 'contact' with them were considered to be polluting as well. One account has it that a female slave belonging to a *Sudhra jati* worked in a family of a *Prabhu* (upper-caste *jati*). The woman was found to have committed adultery with a Dalit (*Antyaj jati*) and thus was regarded as having become polluted. But as she had been working in the *Prabhu* household smearing the floor with cow dung, washing utensils, cutting vegetables and cooking their food she had transmitted her own 'acquired' impurity to the household through her indirect contact (*samsarg*). As a result of this, the whole *Prabhu* household had to undergo a purification ceremony. Further, the house land had to be dug up and purified by letting a cow walk on it, the earthenware and utensils were to be purified by fire and the wooden floor and door had to be destroyed because they could not be purified through fire. The other type of contact was the *spars or sparsaspars*, which meant direct physical contact with the Dalits. Another tale goes that a barber who belonged to a *Shudra* caste (*Nhavi Jati*) unknowingly cut the hair of a Dalit. This bodily contact rendered the barber impure, leading to his excommunication, which was annulled only after an 'appropriate' purification ceremony.[65]

It is interesting to note that most of the terms used to denote the Dalits are fecund with implications of marginalization and oppression. In most of the 'popular' terms used to denote the Dalits the concept of a 'boundary' is very much inherent. They are clearly demarcated from the caste-groups. Some of these terms are '*Varna-sankara*' (meaning people who are 'outside the caste system'); '*Avarnas*' (casteless people); '*Panchamas*' (fifth caste); '*Candalas*' (the worst people of the earth, during the Gupta period); 'Depressed Classes' in the British colonial days; 'Exterior Castes' by the census superintendent of Assam.[66] One should not ignore the most notorious term used for the Dalits – 'Untouchables'. This term

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63 S. Beal, *The Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-yum* (trans. 2nd edn) (London, 1964), p. 55. Quoted by Gen'ichi Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination in Ancient India and Its transition to the Medieval Period', in Hiroyki Kotani (ed.), *Caste System, Untouchability and the Depressed* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999) (paperback edn) (pp. 3–19), p. 14.

64 Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', pp. 12 ff.

65 Hiroyki Kotani, 'Ati Sudra Castes in the Medieval Deccan', in Kotani (ed.), *Caste System* (pp. 55–75), pp. 55 ff.

66 V. Devasahayam, 'Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 1–22), p. 1.

vituperatively condenses the notion of purity and pollution which governed the social interaction and inter-relationships between the various caste groupings and Dalits in India. The Indian constitution recognizes the Dalits as the 'Scheduled Castes'. The Marathi word 'Dalit', which is derived from Sanskrit, is now the most common term identifying the Scheduled Castes as a whole. The word is defined as 'ground' or 'broken' or reduced to pieces generally.[67] In its Sanskritic usage the term 'Dal' means 'broken' and 'down-trodden'. These words really bring out 'the effects of oppression' which the Dalits have undergone over the years and are much in conformity with the Dalit life situation.[68] The one reason why this term has achieved dignified coinage is that it has been widely accepted by the Dalits. The word also maintains the dialectic tension between Dalit historicity as well as their own aspirations for emancipation, which is fuelled by their historical consciousness. Hence this term is considered as being affirmative in their striving towards dignity and equality.

On the basis of notions of purity and pollution the origins of Dalits are identified as being 'debased' and 'disruptive', thus justifying their exclusion from the contours of society. An examination of the theories of origin of some of the Dalit *jatis* would definitely help us to theorize the Dalits under the notions of purity and pollution. As examples we will take into consideration two *jatis* – the *Candalas* found in North India and the *Paraiyars* found in South India. The Hindu law codes (meaning the *Dharmasutras* and their later systematizations the *Manu-smrithi*) postulate that the *Candala* was the progeny of the most condemned *Pratiloma* (hypogamous) marriage, having a *Sudra* father *and a Brahmina* mother.[69] Allegedly this theory however is the 'product of the *varna* conception of the orthodox *Brahminas*'.[70] The same theory operates regarding the origins of the *Paraiyars*; that they are the communities who were born as a result of sexual transgression of social boundaries fabricated by caste and thus ostracized. They are considered the progeny of hypogamous marriages where a 'lower caste' male married a 'higher caste' female.[71] But why are the progeny of people belonging to the four- fold *varnas* ostracized? The 'dividual-particle' theory postulated by McKim Marriot and Ronald Inden helps us with possible

[67] In the words of A.P. Nirmal, who pioneered Dalit Theology in India, the Dalits are 1) the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; 2) the opened, the expanded; 3) the bisected; 4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; 5) the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed; and 6) the manifested, the displayed. 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 214–30), p. 214.

[68] Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards*, p. 1.

[69] john C.B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives* (Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2002) (2nd edn), pp. 11, 12.

[70] Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', pp. 10, 11.

[71] Abbe j.A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (trans. by Henry K. Beauchamp) (3rd edn) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), pp. 38 ff.

answers.[72] The Hindu view of caste has as its basis the belief that human beings are born with a corresponding coded substance which is made up of particles capable of detachment and attachment to different human beings. Members of different castes constitute different coded particles the intermingling of which is considered to be unnatural, disruptive and disorderly for the Hindu social order. Considering the dividuation-potential of the encoded-particles, physical interaction between human beings needs external social control to maintain auspiciousness and order.[73] This is the function of the caste ordering. When intermingling of these particles takes place, for example through sexual relations, it is considered unnatural and disruptive. There is a serious breach and rupture of the symmetrical social order. Thus, how else can order be restored than through the ejection of the 'products of this disharmonious and disruptive conjoining' (the Dalits) from within the contours of the society. Hence we have the Dalit communities who are relegated to a place outside 'society' and contact with whom is cautioned to be potentially 'dangerous'. This can be comparatively analysed with Douglas' arguments about maintaining cognitive categories. Aberrations of cognitive categories can be regarded as anomalies, which pose a threat to society and so need to be avoided.

'Pollution and maintenance of social distance are specific forms of segregation and inequality bred within the Indian caste system.'[74] The permanently polluted status of the Dalits is said to arise from the work they perform, which involves contact with sources of impurity such as death and human excreta. Their occupations such as skinning animal carcasses, tanning leather and making shoes; playing in musical bands; butchery of animals; fishing; removal of human waste (excreta); attendance at cremation grounds; washing clothes; coconut harvesting and the brewing of toddy are considered the principal grounds of permanent pollution.[75] This is in conformity with Douglas' theory that the scale of purity and pollution was conversely proportional to one's proximity to potential sources of impurity like death, bodily refuse, leather and fermented produce. The above-mentioned points referring to the origins and professions of Dalits should logically make us question whether the Dalits are rendered impure because of their occupation (or) because of their origins? Are their menial occupations like scavenging, handling corpses and carcasses, drum beating in funeral processions and tending cremation grounds enforced on them as a form of punishment because of their disruptive origins? (or) Are they branded as being impure and polluting because they perform

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[72] For more on this theory, see McKim Marriot and Ronald B. Inden, 'Towards an Ethnosociology of South Asian Caste Systems', in Kenneth David (ed.), *The New Wind: Changing Identities in South Asia* (Hague and Paris: Mouton Publishers, Chicago: Aldine Publishers, 1977) (pp. 227–38), pp. 232, 233.

[73] Dipankar Gupta, *Social Stratification* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 25.

[74] Tripathy, *Dalits*, p. 13.

[75] Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

these works? Final answers to these questions continue to be elusive. One can make partial sense of it only by understanding the history of the evolution of socio-political hierarchy based on caste, which Gen'ichi Yamazaki explains as follows:

> The Later Vedic Era was also a time when the *Brahmin*as secured the top position in society by virtue of their monopoly of the priesthood. A rough, primitive ideological distinction between purity and pollution developed to the point of fanaticism among the *Brahmin*as, who used such ideas to legitimise their supreme position by stressing their own purity and sanctity.
> The *Kshatriya*s … saw the advantages of incorporating the ideas propounded by the *Brahmin*as into their policies, thus contributing the political ingredient to the development of untouchability. That is to say, the existence of untouchables functioned to displace the dissatisfaction of the direct producers, vaisyas and sudras, within the *varna*-based society, thus ensuring a stable social order.[76]

What emerges is that the Dalits are reckoned to be in a state of permanent pollution, which is 'feared' to be contagious, and thus are denied access to many areas of social and religious life.[77] Andre Beteille sums up the results of the cumulative inequalities in the economic, religious and political systems which ultimately degraded the nature of Dalit existence (though he uses the term 'Harijans'):

> To complete the social degradation of the Harijans, real and symbolic disabilities were also imposed on them by the locally dominant castes and the political authority (king or chief) of the region. Thus Harijans were supposed to supply free labour *(begar)* whenever the officials wanted them to do so and they were not allowed to wear the clothes or jewellery worn by the high castes. They had to live in huts with thatched roofs, and show proper deference in manners and speech to the upper castes.[78]

At the end of this section we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution are the primary criteria employed to discriminate the Dalits. They have severe social, political and economic connotations. The Dalits are the victims of a social system, which sought (and still seeks) to maintain a feigned notion of auspiciousness, purity and order with the intention of self-perpetuation through constantly sustaining the status quo. In short, the caste system thrived (and thrives) as a result of these asymmetries fabricated by the underlying notions of purity and pollution.

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[76] Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', p. 11.
[77] Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.
[78] Beteille, *Castes*, p. 92.

Casteism and Christianity

Discrimination against Dalits on the grounds of purity and pollution is not a reality which prevails in Hinduism alone. Despite all claims of being egalitarian, Christianity is not free from caste discrimination. After dividing Indian Christianity as comprising four segments of people namely, the *shudra* sub-castes, the out-caste untouchables, the hill tribal population and upper classes, Masilamani Azariah (without attempting to obfuscate the anathema of a caste-ridden Indian Christianity) candidly points a sordid picture of their inter-relationships as follows:

> The inter-relationships between and among these four segments confessing the one Lord, one baptism and one faith seem to be incapable of achieving or witnessing to one fellowship as members of the same Body of Christ. This incapacity for fellowship clearly arises from the attitude to caste held by the different segments. Each segment seems to be affirming and holding on to the same old attitudes of caste that they had carried or brought into the Church, changing not even an iota from their former attitudes. The same unconscious structure of beliefs regarding caste that continue to dominate the different segments of the population outside the Church in society at large are continued also inside the Church.[79]

james Massey quotes Archbishop George Zur, the Apostolic Pro-Nuncio to India, to point to the caste discrimination which prevails among the Catholic churches in India. According to Archbishop Zur:

> Though Catholics of the lower caste and tribes form 60 percent of Church membership they have no place in decision-making. Scheduled caste converts are treated as lower caste not only by high caste Hindus but by high caste Christians too. In rural areas they cannot own or rent houses, however well-placed they may be. Separate places are marked out for them in parish churches and burial grounds. Inter-caste marriages are frowned upon and caste tags are still appended to the Christian names of high caste people. Casteism is rampant among the clergy and the religious. Though Dalit Christians make 65 percent of the 10 million Christians in the South, less than 4 percent of the parishes are entrusted to Dalit priests.[80]

The Protestant churches fare no better than the Catholic churches apart from the fact that some predominantly Dalit dioceses have got Dalit Bishops. The other

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[79] Masilamani Azariah, ‘The Church’s Healing Ministry of the Dalits’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 316–23), p. 319.

[80] Quoted in james Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995), p. 82.

ways in which casteism continues among the Indian churches are through – the non-acceptance of a Dalit priest by a caste congregation; reluctance of 'upper caste' priests to pay pastoral visits to Dalit homes; use of a separate chalice during the 'sharing' of the Eucharist; preference to caste communities to partake in the Eucharist ahead of the Dalits in order to avoid pollution; denial of access through the main door for the Dalits; maintaining a separate entrance for the Dalits in churches where Dalits and the Caste communities worship together; separate seating and separate burial grounds. These, along with the strong discouragement of inter-caste marriages, help us to recognise how notions of purity and pollution are strongly entrenched in the 'caste-Christian' psyche.[81] In Tamil Nadu only upper-caste Christians have their feet washed by priests on Holy Thursday. During the parish festival the decorated car is not permitted to pass through the streets of Dalit Christians.[82] Researches in places where both the 'upper-castes' and Dalits are predominantly Christian have shown that notions of purity and pollution play an influential role in determining social-discrimination and social relations between these two groups of Christians.[83]

One reason for the prevailing casteism in the Indian Churches is that in spite of being born as Christians, many 'professing' Christians seldom renounce their affiliation to their *jatis*. George Soares-Prabhu deplores the infiltration of caste-discrimination into the celebration of the Eucharist and condemns it as 'sacrilege'. He also attacks the breaking up of participants in the Eucharistic celebration into caste-groups, and the practice of treating 'fellow members of the one Eucharistic community' (the true 'body of Christ') as outcasts by consigning them to special parts of the church or to separate places in a communion queue, and accuses such attempts of seeking to parody the Eucharist.[84] Thus we can conclude that notions of purity and pollution are strongly held even among Christians. This is symptomized by the fact that 'caste even in its most virulent form of "untouchability" is rife in the Christian communities'.[85] 'There can be no clearer indication of the massive failure of Christian teaching in India (and specifically of the immense and costly system of education it has built up) than the fact that large sections of the Indian

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[81] Edward Matthias, 'Identity Dilemmas Confronting the Dalits', in *VJTR*, Vol. 64, 2000 (pp. 131–8), p. 133.

[82] Lancy Lobo, 'Dalit Religious Movements and Dalit Identity', in Walter Fernandes (ed.), *The Emerging Dalit Identities: The Reassertion of the Subalterns* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996) (pp. 166–83), p. 174.

[83] See S. japhet, 'Christian Dalits: A Sociological Study on the Problem of Gaining a New Identity', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXIV, September 1987 (pp. 59–87), George Koilparampil, *Caste in the Catholic Community in Kerala* (Kochin: CISRS, 1982), pp. 154–68.

[84] George M Soares-Prabhu, 'The Table Fellowship of jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today', in George Soares-Prabhu (posthumous), *The Dharma of Jesus* (ed. by Francis Xavier D'sa) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2003), (pp. 117–32), p. 128.

[85] Soares-Prabhu, 'The Table Fellowship of jesus', pp. 127, 128.

church can still assume condescending caste attitudes, without even being conscious of the fact that they are guilty of serious sin.'[86]

The Outline of this Book

In the light of the prevailing caste-based discrimination against the Dalit communities, the concern regarding the practical feasibility of Dalit Theology will dictate the aim and content of this book. Therefore, I will primarily analyse the theological reasons for the gap between Dalit theology and the social practice of the Indian Church. The first chapter, *Answering Some Questions: The Why, What and How of Dalit Theology*, will furnish a basic overview of the *origins*, *objectives* and *approaches* of Dalit theology. After identifying the reasons leading to the emergence of Dalit theology and the objectives of Dalit theology we will move on to delineate the framework of praxis envisaged by Dalit theology. This chapter will further interrogate the link between the theological content of Dalit theology and its praxiological framework with the view that such an enquiry can usefully foreground any critical analysis of the practical efficacy of Dalit theology.

The second chapter, *Questioning Some Answers*, critically analyses Dalit theology in the light of the central problem of this book, which is the failure of Dalit theology to influence the praxis of the church, with the intention of identifying possible reasons for this lacunae between theology and practice. Having identified the theological reasons for the practical inefficacy of Dalit theology, the task of chapter three, *The Way Forward*, is to propose and explore alternative theological paradigms for Dalit theology with the intention of enhancing the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. Taking into consideration the critique of Dalit theology which emerged in the previous chapter, this chapter explores the synoptic healing stories as a viable alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. The hypothesis put forward is that the synoptic healing stories can not only provide a Christian ethical basis to critique notions of purity and pollution, but also can enable a critical methodological and theological revision of Dalit theology with a focus on praxis. The next section of the book tests the suitability of the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit theology on the following grounds – their potential to offer an ethical framework which can influence Christian attitudes towards notions of purity and pollution, and their ability to critically enhance the praxis-potential and practical efficacy of Dalit theology. In line with this, chapter four, *A Christian Ethical Framework of Action*, identifies certain ethical features from the synoptic healing stories which can be used as a foundation for the Indian Church's praxis in the context of casteism. The following features are identified; touch/defiance of uncleanness, compassion, faith, conflict/confrontation. Certain principles of practice applicable to the Dalit situation are identified through an analysis of the interplay of these features in select stories. When deriving

[86] Soares-Prabhu, 'The Table Fellowship of j esus', p. 128.

principles for action from the synoptic healing stories, corresponding examples from Dalit secular politics, which have significantly influenced the struggle for Dalit liberation and contributed to social transformation, are drawn in order to endorse the practicability of these principles. In chapters five to seven the book narrows its focus to three specific issues which arose in the critical evaluation of Dalit theology namely – the problem of efficacious Christology, the question of Dalit agency and resistance, and the issue of praxiological partnerships. Therefore, each of these chapters interprets one healing story each in relation to one of these three specific issues. Chapter five, *Re-visiting Dalit Christology*, deals with the story of the healing of the leper found in Mark 1:40–45. We read the passage in the light of the marginalization of the Dalits on grounds of impurity. The story is briefly interpreted in the light of the motif of boundary transcendence in order to demonstrate the interplay of the different ethical principle delineated earlier. Specific attention is paid to the need for a transition in Dalit Christology. In critical interaction with the christological trajectories which emerge in the story implications for a liberative Dalit Christology are drawn. Chapter six, *Rethinking Agency, Re-signifying Resistance*, deals with an exorcism located in the country of the Gadarenes in Matthew (8:28–34) and in the country of the Gerasenes in both Mark (5:1–20) and Luke (8:26–39). Attention is paid to the Markan version of the story. This story is chosen for its ability to address the issue of Dalit agency and resistance. In the light of the polyvocal nature of Dalit resistance, the insights gained from a political reading of the text are employed for a praxis-oriented critique of the modes of resistance advocated by Dalit theology. Insights for a praxis of resistance are drawn on the basis of an allegorical interpretation of j esus' exorcising actions. The role of the Dalits as subjects and agents in the liberation process is discussed in this chapter. Chapter seven, *Re-configuring Dalit Praxis: Re-imagining the Other*, discusses in detail the story of the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman found in both Matthew and Mark in relation to the praxis of partnership envisaged by Dalit theology. This chapter focuses on evolving integrationist and inclusive models of praxis for Dalit theology in order to enhance the praxis potential of Dalit theology. The focus is on the politics of 'othering' both within and outside Dalit theology. The chapter works out a rationale for moving beyond othering towards an other-centred praxis which can help evolving pragmatic and holistic partnership which can lead to concrete and corporate engagement in the task of Dalit liberation.

As the Dalit struggle is not a monolithic struggle but has a multi-dimensionality and dynamism, it is recognized that re-reading the bible for social justice in such a dynamic context requires what Musa Dube calls a 'nomadic reader, who will have to use and develop different methods and new theories of reading'.[87] In such a context the interpreter 'is constantly forced to delve into completely new reading

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[87] Musa W. Dube, 'Rereading the Bible: Biblical Hermeneutics and Social j ustice', in Emmanuel Katongole (ed.), *African Theology Today* (Scranton: The University of Scranton Press, 2002) (pp. 57–68), p. 66.

strategies' and engage in a continuous re-reading of biblical texts to deal with new challenges.[88] Therefore, in conformity with the purpose of what is identified as 'people's hermeneutics', our purpose in the hermeneutical appropriation of the healing stories in this book has been be 'to gain enlightenment on their (Dalits') existential problems and to empower themselves to solve them through transformative action in order to enhance life'.[89] The Bible is viewed as 'a lens through which one might read the story of today and lend it a new perspective'.[90] It is envisaged to glean the meaning of the biblical narrative for the present through a circular dialectic 'between the biblical word on liberation and our process of liberation'.[91]

Chapter eight concludes the book by offering a summary of the findings of the previous chapters and an assessment of the problems and possibilities of using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. In the light of the findings of the previous chapters it is concluded that as the synoptic healing stories have the ability to both espouse issues which are integral to the question of praxis, and to articulate ethical paradigms which make the Indian Christian involvement in practical action possible, we can argue that the synoptic healing stories can function as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology; and can enhance its praxis-potential significantly.

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88 Dube, 'Rereading', p. 65.

89 Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundation of People's Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 163. Addition mine.

90 Christopher Rowland, 'Epilogue: the Future of Liberation Theology', in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) (pp. 248–51), p. 250.

91 j ose Severino Croatto, *Exodus Hermeneutics of Freedom* (New York: Orbis, 1978), p. 3.

Chapter 1

Answering Some Questions – The Why, What and How of Dalit Theology

Why did Dalit Theology emerge? What are its objectives? How does Dalit theology attempt to achieve these objectives? These three questions which interrogate the origins, objectives and approaches of Christian Dalit theology constitute the grid within which the structure of the present chapter is worked out. This chapter not only seeks to furnish a general overview of Dalit theology by way of '*answering these questions*' but also sets the scene for the next chapter which specifically attempts to interrogate the nature of the relationship between theology and social practice as envisaged and imagined in Christian Dalit theology by '*questioning the answers*', with the anticipation that such an inquiry can adequately foreground any subsequent discussion on the practical efficacy of Dalit theology.

Why Dalit Theology?

It has been acknowledged that Christian Dalit Theology emerged due to 'the insensitivity of the Church and Indian Christian theology to Dalit concerns and the deeper dimensions of their struggle and aspirations for fuller humanity, despite the majority of Christians being of Dalit origin'.[1] This insensitivity, of which both Indian Christianity and Indian Christian Theology are held guilty, can only be understood in the wider context of the development of Indian Christianity and Indian Christian Theology.

Dalits and Indian Christianity

The story of Dalits and Christianity is to a great extent also the story of caste within Christianity. Therefore, in order to understand Christianity and its attitudes towards the Dalit Christians it is pertinent to delve into the different attitudes to caste that prevailed, and continue to prevail, among some 'main-stream' church traditions – the Syrian Christians, the Roman Catholic Missions and the Protestant Missions (which can be further divided broadly on a denominational basis into the Lutherans, the Baptists and the Anglo-Saxons).

[1] Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 203.

Syrian Christians The Syrian Christians, who trace their origins to Apostle Thomas, have been 'for centuries encapsulated within the caste society. They have been regarded by Hindus as a caste society, occupying a recognized (and high) place within the caste hierarchy.'[2] The reasons for this are not clear. According to james Massey around 1020 AD the Syrian Christians along with the jewish community were accorded the status of caste Hindus. They were given a list of 72 privileges including the right to ride an elephant, to be preceded by drums and trumpets and to have criers announcing their approach so that the people from 'lower' castes could withdraw from the streets. Gradually it became inevitable for them to internalize caste influences by which they sought to provide legitimization for their status.[3] The Syrian Christians have ever since functioned as a caste community in the South Indian state of Kerala,[4] and, even today, to a large extent, remain as a 'close endogamous upper-caste group'[5] Along with the Roman Catholics, the Syrian Orthodox Churches have largely adopted an 'organic view' of caste which treats the caste system as a system of social classification.[6] In comparison with other Christian denominations, the Churches with Syrian Christian background are generally considered to be more rigid in observing caste discrimination.

Roman Catholic Missions The Portuguese, who were the first Roman Catholic missionaries, experienced success of 'caste-conversions' with the mass conversions of two fishing *jatis* – the *Paravars* (of the south-eastern tip of India) in 1535–37, and the *Mukkuvars* (of the south-western tip of India) in 1544.[7] The two communities resorted to conversions as an avenue of protection from local oppression.[8] Later, Francis Xavier, a jesuit priest, is believed to have baptized several thousand people belonging to different caste groups, the majority however being the 'outcaste' *Pariahs* in south-east India. This 'caste-conversion' method strongly influenced later Roman Catholic missionary thinking.[9] These conversions triggered problems regarding the incorporation of the converts into the so far 'upper-caste' Church, which resulted in separatism. The 'new Christians' (who

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2 Duncan B. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity: Attitudes and Policies on Caste of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions in India* (London and Dublin: Curzon Press, Atlantic Highlands, Nj: USA: Humanities Press Inc, 1980), p. 14, also pp. 98–101.

3 Massey, *Down Trodden*, pp. 28ff.

4 Ninan Koshy, *Caste in Kerala Churches* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1968).

5 Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity: A Historical Review and Present Challenges', in Alan Gadd and D.C. Premraj (eds), *New Lamps: Fresh Insights into Mission* (London: All Saint's Church, 2001) (pp. 99–116), p. 105.

6 john C.B. Webster, 'Who is a Dalit', in S.M. Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India: Visions and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999) (pp. 68–79), p. 75.

7 Dionysius Rasquinha, 'A Brief Historical Analysis of the Emergence of Dalit Christian Theology', in *VJTR*, Vol. 66, May 2002 (pp. 353–70), p. 354.

8 john C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 35.

9 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 14.

also included the Dalit Paraiah converts apart from the two 'low caste' jatis) followed the Latin rite used by the Portuguese. They were thus segregated from the 'upper-caste' Thomas Christian descendants who followed the Syrian rite.[10] It was the difficulty associated with handling the entry of different castes into the Christian faith which led to caste divisions within the Church.

Robert de Nobili, a Roman Catholic priest who started the Madurai Mission in 1606, recognized the success of Christianity among the 'low castes' and was resolved to change this. Hence de Nobili and his associates addressed their mission predominantly to the 'high castes', declaring themselves as 'new Brahmins'.[11] They even sought the permission of the Church to accommodate caste practices, and the Bull of Pope Gregory xv, '*Bulla Romanae Sedis Antistes*' acceded to their requests. They were allowed the use of traditional customs and usages under the consideration that certain external rites like the use of the sacred thread, sandal and ablutis by the Brahmin converts could be interpreted as denoting nobility and function and hence tolerable.[12] This accommodation of caste on 'social' lines also resulted in policies of discrimination as de Nobili's Madurai Mission did not merely allow caste-based distinctions to continue in the church. Rather, the Mission itself was divided. While Brahmin *sanyasis* exclusively ministered to the 'high castes', there were another category of priests – the *pandaraswamis* – who ministered to the 'low castes'.[13]

We can say that in general the Catholics followed a policy of adaptation and 'chose to work within the caste system'.[14] Right from the beginning they regarded the caste system 'as the given and religiously neutral structure of Indian Society within which evangelization, understood as the conversion of individuals without detaching them from their social context, and also the conversion of whole caste groups, might proceed.'[15]

The Protestant Missions – Lutheran Pietists The first Protestant Missionaries to India, Ziegenbalg and Plutschau, were the pioneers of the Tranquebar Lutheran Mission (1706). Their theological rootedness in evangelistic pietism (they both studied in the University of Halle) led them to focus on individualistic Lutheran pietism, and on spiritual rebirth (*weidergeburt*).[16] Their emphasis on the Lutheran doctrine of the two kingdoms rendered politics and culture irrelevant to faith.[17]

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10 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

11 james Massey, *Towards a Dalit Hermeneutics* (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2001), pp. 26 ff.

12 S. Lourduswamy, *Equal Rights to all Dalits: With Special Reference to Dalit Christians* (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2001), pp. 13 ff.

13 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

14 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 35.

15 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 14.

16 Massey, *Dalit Hermeneutics*, p. 27.

17 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 17

For them, addressing the issue of caste was secular work which did not fall under their gamut of 'spiritual work' but was subordinate to it.[18] According to Duncan B. Forrester, the Lutherans fluctuated between two possibilities in treating caste:

> On the one hand, they could treat caste as being irrelevant to their efforts, seeking to convert individuals, whose keeping or breaking of caste would have no relation to their religious profession …. The other possibility was that India might be evangelized through the conversion of caste groups – roughly the position of Xavier and de Nobili.[19]

Both these approaches engendered the accommodation of caste within the Lutheran Missions.

The Protestant Missions – The Anglo-Saxons The Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions were different from the other missions because they were the most outspoken in their critique of caste. Along with the Baptists they reached a consensus about the incompatibility of caste with Christianity by the mid-19th century.[20] Argument, however, existed over the tactical question of how to deal with caste as an institution, which 'as it stood, virtually all Christians found offensive to a greater or a lesser degree'.[21] Therefore Protestants resorted to different ways of dealing with caste, like the enforcement of strict discipline which made churches 'communities of the economically and socially underprivileged'.[22] Though the Protestant missions were naïve, unrealistic and unsuccessful (in terms of their stated objectives) in their attacks on caste in the society at large, they achieved in some instances 'protection against indignities and oppression of low-caste people'.[23] The most significant achievement of the Protestant critique of caste was the major contribution it made in the radical transformation of the opinion of the educated in India.[24]

The Protestant Missions were popular with Dalits and witnessed many mass movements in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. This altered the face of Indian Christianity by bringing converts from many Dalit communities, like the *Chuhras* in Punjab, the *Mazhabi* Sikhs, the *Bhangis* or *Lalbegis,* and to a lesser extent the *Chamars* in Uttar Pradesh, the *Dheds* in Gujarat, the *Mangs* and *Mahars* in Maharstra, the *Malas* and *Madigas* in various parts of Andhra Pradesh, the *Paraiyars* as well as *Madharis* (*Chakkiliyar*) in Tamil Nadu, the *Paraiyars*

18 Massey, *Dalit Hermeneutics*, p. 27.
19 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 18.
20 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, pp. 23–43.
21 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 199.
22 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 199.
23 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 200.
24 Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 201.

and *Pullayars* in Kerala.[25] By the mid-20th century, the Dalit proportion among Indian Christians escalated and almost two-thirds of Indian Christians were Dalit.[26] Disillusionment with the Hindu caste-system combined with the hope of a new and enhanced identity[27] was an important undergirding rationale for a majority of these conversions. The general consensus regarding the underlying motivation for these conversion is that the Dalits were searching for '*a greater sense of personal dignity and self respect, improved socio-economic status, education for their children, healing from sickness, solidarity in times of suffering and death, protection from oppression and an end to exploitation*'.[28] The Dalits felt cared for by someone. Not only did the Gospel message kindle hope and solace in their hearts, but the missionaries' 'accessibility to and considerable influence with the rulers also assured them of a much-needed protection'.[29] Further, Christianity also enabled the converts to alter their perceptions of self and the world, change their life-style as well as to acquire 'enhanced resources for self-improvement and self-empowerment'.[30]

Despite the positive impact that they had on the Dalit communities the Protestant missions could not eradicate caste influence completely from the Churches. On a social basis it was difficult for the missionaries to accept mass conversions because many missions and missionaries were highly conscious of being branded as promoters of 'Rice Christianity'.[31] This deterred any radical acceptance of Dalit communities. It is further alleged that even the Protestant missionaries adopted the discriminatory 'infiltration policy' which rendered the Dalits marginal.[32] However,

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[25] Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 39 ff.

[26] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 103.

[27] Forrester says that one should never neglect 'that a conversion movement is like a kind of group identity crisis, in which the group passes through a negative rejection of their lowly place in Hindu society to a positive affirmation of a new social and religious identity. The new identity does not depend on its acceptance and recognition by the higher castes; indeed it has been chosen and is sustained despite their refusal to accept it'. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 77.

[28] Rasquinha, 'A Brief ', p. 355. Emphasis in original.

[29] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 103.

[30] Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 57, 70.

[31] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', pp. 106, 107.

[32] This infiltration policy upheld the notion that upper-caste conversions would precede and set the tone for lower caste conversions. According to Godwin and Nora Shiri, the infiltration policy culminated in the formation of a fractured Christian community where Dalits remained largely a marginalized group:

'This resulted in a dualism manifested in many ways: … Upper caste converts were being given places of prominence, offered opportunities including leadership positions. True, missionaries were very critical of Brahmins and their way of life but like the 'natives' of this country, missionaries too often esteemed Brahmins as the apex of the Indian society and the Dalits as the lowest.' Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', pp. 105, 106.

Webster differs from accepting the infiltration theory,[33] with the sole exception being the example of Alexander Duff the great Scottish missionary educator.[34] The attempts of the missionaries to eliminate caste from the churches was more successful in North India than in the South where missionaries became divided over whether the best strategy for eliminating caste was a hardline prohibition or a more conciliatory approach.[35] Though a consensus had evolved among the Protestant churches opposing caste and its myriad manifestations in the Indian Church, it was always very hard to uproot caste from the churches because of the deep-rooted and all pervasive nature of the caste system,[36] as well as the amazing resilience and adaptability of caste to new challenges and opportunities.[37] This meant that the hope of the Dalits for ‘a better life free from stigma and humiliation’ was not fulfilled for the bulk of the Dalits within the churches.[38] Therefore, the Dalits who converted to Christianity felt increasingly discriminated against.

Casteism continued within the Indian Protestant churches as the restraints on caste-practices within Christianity were not effective. In the twentieth century the prevalence of casteism soon manifested as apathy towards the Dalits across the various Christian denominations. Various reasons have been identified for this apathy, some of which are: deterioration of the Church’s initial concern for Dalits over the decades, concentration of church leadership in the hands of urban-based/ urban-oriented upper caste or elite Christian Dalits, the inadequacy of the western as well as Sanskritic moorings (or captivity?) of the Church to help effectively in the liberative concerns of the Dalits, and the increasingly institutionalized and hierarchical ministry of the Church which ‘pre-occupied itself with many

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[33] He maintains that the Protestant missionaries, in a manner inconsistent with the Roman Catholics, identified the caste system as the defining feature of Hinduism when juxtaposing their own claims for the true nature of an egalitarian Christianity against, and in contrast to, the alleged falsity of a hierarchical Hinduism. Webster argues that the general evangelistic activities of the Protestant missionaries encompassed a broad range of activities none of which were caste specific. The Protestant missionary approach to evangelism was sporadic, ubiquitous and indiscriminate, a fact which was aptly testified by the membership of the early Protestant mission churches which reflected widely diverse social backgrounds. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 36–7.

[34] Duff, whose mission was centred in Calcutta, established high-quality English medium schools which imparted western education to the Bengali elite with the undergirding intention being the winning of converts from the Bengali elite, who would in turn gradually influence the masses. Webster contends that Duff’s work was highly specialised and though an attractive model for others was seldom emulated nor could be emulated. Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 35 ff.

[35] Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 37 ff.

[36] Nora and Godwin Shiri, ‘Dalits and Christianity’, p. 106.

[37] Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, p. 201.

[38] Chatterjee, ‘Why Dalit Theology?’, in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 179–200), p. 184.

unproductive priorities and issues'.[39] All this led to the collapse of the pastoral ministry to the Dalits. In a complex socio-political situation where the growing need was for a well-integrated ministry that would empower the Dalits holistically, the Indian Church remained inaccessible and unresponsive to their situations as Dalits continued to be marginalized even within the Churches. There was denial of opportunities and just sharing of church resources and leadership so that Christian Dalits became the 'unwanted children' of the Church.[40] This discrimination against the Dalit Christians within the Churches was one of the factors which influenced the emergence of Dalit theology.[41] Thus, we can argue that though mass conversion of Dalits to Christianity from 1870–1960 influenced the emergence of Dalit theology as a confessional reality in the Indian context,[42] it was the increasing perception of the discrimination against the Dalits within the Indian Church and the society[43] which ultimately provided the impetus for the emergence of Christian Dalit theology as a theology of liberation.

Dalits and Indian Christian Theology

What is today known as Indian Christian theology emerged because Indian theologians felt that theological articulation originating outside India was 'ineffective and had little relevance' for the Indian context and hence felt the need for a change in approach.[44] Therefore, Indian Christian theological articulation

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[39] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 113.

[40] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity', p. 112.

[41] Chatterjee, 'Why?', pp. 182 ff.

[42] Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 355.

[43] Chatterjee points out that Christian Dalits are 'twice-alienated': not only are they discriminated by the non-Dalits on the basis of their Dalit identity but they are also marginalized within the Church. It was particularly unfortunate that their aspirations for a better life, devoid of the stigma and humiliation of impure status remained unfulfilled within the church. Chatterjee, 'Why?', pp. 182 ff.

Prabhakar calls casteism within the Indian church a theological contradiction and a spiritual problem and talks about the four-fold alienation of the Christian Dalits which involves:

a) Discrimination from the state when it comes to rendering economic assistance, educational benefits or political representation on the basis of their Christian identity.

b) Disfavour from fellow Dalits, when Christian Dalits seek governmental assistance, on the common presumption that Christian Dalits have already been uplifted by missionary patronage.

c) Contemptuous treatment from 'upper-caste' Christians, and

d) Internal conflicts between Christian Dalits on sub-caste, regional or linguistic basis.

See Prabhakar, 'The Search', pp. 205, 206.

[44] Hubert Manohar Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology for India Today: An Appraisal of the Christologies of John Hick, Jurgen Moltmann and Jon Sobrino* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), p. 52.

using Hindu Philosophy and Vedantic categories were attempted. In the late 18th century under the influence of Raja Ram Mohun Roy's *Brahmo Samaj* the initial attempts at a contextual indigenous theology were made.[45] The *Brahma Samajists* were the first to attempt indigenous interpretations of Christ.[46] Krishna Mohan Banerjea (1813–85), in his *The Arian Witness*[47] attempted an inter-textual reading of biblical narratives and *Vedic* texts[48] to posit not only the theological continuity between the bible and *Vedas* but also the historical continuity of Christianity with *Vedic* Hinduism by demonstrating the correspondence between biblical teachings and the *Vedas*.[49] Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–1884), another Bengali Brahmasamajist, argued that Christ should be presented in India in his Hindu character, not like a civilized European, but as an Asiatic ascetic.[50] He was the first to use the category of *Sat-Chit-Ananda* (being, intelligence, bliss) to interpret the godhead and was highly influential on a number of other theologians like Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya and Palani Andi.[51] His theology can be called a

[45] A.M. Mundadan, *Paths of Indian Theology* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998), p. 9. The *Brahma Samaj* was a reform movement within Hinduism, which, under the influence of liberal English education and Christian ideals, sought to reform Hinduism.

[46] Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indian Christianity* (Madras: CLS and Bangalore: CISRS, 1969), p. 12.

[47] Popularly known as *The Arian Witness*, the full title of the book is *The Arian Witness: or the Testimony of Arian Scriptures in Collaboration of Biblical History and the Rudiments of Christian Doctrine, Including Dissertations on the Original and Early Adventures of Indo-Aryans* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co, 1875). Banerjea interpreted j esus Christ as the true *Prajapathi* the Vedic 'Lord of the Creatures' whose self-sacrifice makes possible deliverance. See R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 92–4 and Sathianathan Clarke, 'The j esus of 19th Century Indian Christian Theology', in *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 5, Part.1 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999) (pp. 32–49).

[48] Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 90. Banerjea's intention was 'a) to show that the *Vedas* come closer to the spirit of Christianity than the Hebrew scriptures; b) to demonstrate that the pristine form of Hinduism found in the *Vedas* is identical with the Christian scriptures; c) to reposition contemporary Indian Christians as the spiritual heirs of the Aryan Hindus; and d) to project Vedic Hinduism as a preparation for biblical faith'. R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Post-colonialism: Contesting the Interpretations* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p. 5.

[49] For more, see T.V. Philip (ed.), *Krishna Mohan Banerjea: Christian Apologist*, Confessing the Faith in India, Series, No. 15 (Bangalore: CISRS, 1982), p. 121. Banerjea discerned parallelism between the creation, the fall and flood narrative and the 10th *Mandala* of the *Rig-Veda* Hymn 129, the serpent section of the Mahabahratha and the *Satapatha Brahmann*.

[50] Keshub Chandra Sen, 'India Asks: Who is Christ?', in *Lectures in India* (Calcutta: Navavidhan Publications, 1954) (pp. 351–76) p. 375.

[51] Sen, 'That Marvellous Mystery – The Trinity', in *Lectures in India* (pp. 467–82).

'Christo-centric Trinitarian theology'.[52] Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya (1861–1907) another Bengali theologian, used the *Advaita* (philosophy of non-Dualism)[53] and premised his articulation of Christology within the overall Vedantic Trinitarian framework of God as *Sat, Chit, Ananda*. He considered Christ as the perfect fulfilment of centuries of Hindu longings.[54] The next phase of Indian Christian Theology focused on positing an upfront to western Christianity's theological triumphalism and expansionism. The dominant focus of the historic International Missionary Conference at Tambaram (Madras, 1938), which was the denouncement of Christian claims to exclusivism by exploring possibilities for harmonious relationship between Christian and Hindu religious themes, also characterized Indian Christian theological thought. A group of 'upper caste' thinkers popularly known as the Madras Re-thinking Group dominated the theological arena. Bishop Aiyadurai jesudason Appasamy (1891–1975) attempted to present Christianity as a *Bhakti* religion with mystical elements.[55] He used *Ramanuja's* philosophical system – the *visistadvaita* or modified non-dualism – in his exposition of the *Bhakti* tradition.[56] Theologians like Pandipedi Chenchiah (1886–1959)[57] and

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[52] Sen, 'India Asks', p. 375.

[53] Baago, *Pioneers*, p. 27.

[54] Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, 'The Hymn of the Incarnation', in *The Twentieth Century* I/I (1901), pp. 7–8. English translation in Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: CLS, 1994), pp. 77–8. Quoted in Clarke, 'jesus'.

[55] *Bhakti* – The *Bhakti* movement advocated *Bhakti* (devotion) as a way to Salvation. It was a counter-movement, which questioned the 'upper caste' Hindu belief that *Gnana* (knowledge), *Karma* (good deeds) and *Dhyana* (reflection) were the only ways to salvation. Though many of the prominent *Bhakti* saints were from the non-*brahmin* and 'lower-castes', some of the Bhakti saints, like Chokhamela, Kanaka, Namdev and Ravidas, were from the Dalit communities.

[56] Aiyadurai jesudason Appasamy, *Christianity as Bhakti Marga: A Study of the Johannine Doctrine of Love* (Madras: CLS, 1991) (3rd edn), pp. 39, 43. It is the idea of God's immanence in the cosmos as Logos (*antharyamin*), which even preceded the incarnation, that permeates Appasamy's exposition of the *visistadvaita* philosophy.

[57] Chenchiah's theology can be called as the theology of the new creation. His theology revolves around a fulcrum which he calls 'the raw fact of Christ'. The raw fact of Christ is, for Chenchiah, the historical Christ who still lives today. It is the '*anubhava*' or direct experience of this living Christ which is the central fact of the Christian life. Chenchiah's Christology had an emphasis on the newness of Christ who was the 'Godman' not God-Man, the first fruits of a new creation and in him God and humanity merge. He emphasizes the 'permanent humanity of Christ' as the *Adi-purusha* or the cosmic Christ who inaugurates the new creation and from whom a new race in creation emnates. *'Anubhava'* or direct experience of the living Christ is pivotal for Christian faith. Pandipedi Chenchaiah, 'Christian Message in a Non-Christian World', in D.M. Devasahayam and A.N. Sudarisanam (eds), *Rethinking Christianity* (Madras: A.N. Sudarisanam, 1938) (pp. 47–56), p. 53. See also Mundadan, *Paths*, pp. 15, 16.

Vengal Chakkarai (1880–1958)[58] made significant contributions towards the emergence of a new Indian Christian consciousness on a Christo-centric basis as they engaged in a pursuit to harmonize Hindu philosophical thought and Christian theology in their quest for an authentically indigenous theological expression.[59] *Raimundo Panikkar* a Roman Catholic theologian attempted a cross-fertilization of Hinduism and Christianity using an inclusive approach.[60] In his '*The Unknown Christ of Hinduism'*, Panikkar argues for Christ as the meeting point of various religions and 'calls the living presence of Christ in Hinduism as the Unknown Christ'.[61] On the other side of the theological spectrum, the spirit of national independence which vitiated the early part of the 20th century led to a theology of Indian renaissance which was characterized by positive Christian response to the national renaissance.[62]

The post-Independence era saw theologians like P.D. Devanandan,[63] and M.M. Thomas who focused on nation building and the nature of mission in the Indian context. Devanandan's theology was a Christian theology of nation-building and inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue. Certain important features of Devanandan's theology were the recognition of Christ as the centre of the world, recognition of the inter-relatedness of the Church with other-faith communities, understanding the theology of mission of the church as extending beyond the institutional church, recognizing national reconstruction and commitment to a fuller human

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[58] It is the 'Christhood of God' which is the starting point of Chakkarai's theology. This Christhood of God is the manifestation of God through jesus who gives colour, light and form to God. For Chakkarai the foundation of our knowledge of God is *our experience and consciousness* of jesus. This is *Bhakti* which is the result of a mystical experience and at the centre of which is the cross. Chakkarai focuses on what he thinks are the two religious longings of Indian Christians: namely to be in direct contact with jesus and to have a rebirth, i.e. to be born in the image of jesus. He gives central importance to the cross. Vengal Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar* (Madras: CLS, 1927), and Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought* (Madras: CLS, 1932), p. 143.

[59] Mundadan, *Paths*, p. 15.

[60] Raimundo Panikkar, 'The Myth of Pluralism: The Tower of Babel – A Meditation on Non- Violence', in *Cross Currents*, Vol. 29, 1979 (pp. 197–230); *The Unknown Christ: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany* (New York: Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1981; *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man, Icon-Person-Mystery* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), pp. XV–XVI.

[61] Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964).

[62] Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 38.

[63] Devanandan pioneered the setting up of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) which promoted the engagement of Christianity in issues related to the various dimensions of human life.

life as imperatives of Christian mission.[64] In his book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance*, M.M. Thomas developed his theme of a 'living theology', which must emerge out of a dialogical situation with the philosophy and theology of neo-Hinduism. Thomas understood salvation as humanization and his understanding of Christianity can be premised under '*karma marga'* or the way of action. He adopts an empathetic approach to Hindu Christian encounter. Thomas affirms that the core of Christian faith is the message that God has acted in a unique way in a secular historic event.[65] Also central to Thomas' theology is the 'Cosmic Lordship of Christ', which provides the theological impulse to work for human development and social transformation. He considered Christian faith and worship as 'a response to the movement of the Spirit of God in history who in the risen Christ has given a foretaste of the overcoming of all personal and collective evil, and victory over death, and who will lead history to its consummation in the coming again of Christ and the conversion of the kingdoms of this world into the kingdom of God and His Christ'.[66] Thomas needs special mention because his theological articulations have been considered pertinent for Dalit theology. Adrian Bird in his work *M.M. Thomas and Dalit Theology* argues that Thomas 'contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit Christian Theology'.[67] While being cautious enough to acknowledge that Thomas' theology 'cannot simply be transposed into the Dalit theological context', Bird goes on to postulate that through 'locating M.M. Thomas as a liberation theologian opposed to caste communalism, class injustice and human indignity, and as one searching for a dynamic theological foundation adequate to the quest for a full, liberating and just Indian society' it can be argued that Thomas' theological contribution 'was significant for the emergence of Dalit theology, and remains relevant for present day Dalit theological discourse'.[68]

However, theologians who critically viewed Indian Christian theology from the Dalit perspective found the theological thinking which was articulated using Hindu philosophical ideas to be alienated from the reality of Indian Christianity because it was non-representational of the Dalits who constituted the majority of the Christian community in India. Dalit theologians like A.P. Nirmal found it problematic that both the traditional Indian Christian theology and the more recent third world theology 'failed to see in the struggle of the Indian Dalits for liberation

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[64] M.M. Thomas and P.T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology: Life and Thought of Some Pioneers* (Tiruvalla: New Day Publications, 1992), p. 188.

[65] M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Hindu Renaissance* (Madras: CLS, 1970), p. 187.

[66] M.M. Thomas, 'The Pattern of Christian Spirituality', in *Religion and Society,* Vol. 16, No. 2, 1969. Cited in Godwin Shiri, *Christian Social Thought in India: 1962–1977* (Madras: CLS, 1982), p. 142.

[67] Adrian Bird, *M.M. Thomas and Dalit Theology* (Bangalore: BTESSC and SATHRI, 2008), p. 2.

[68] Bird, *M.M.Thomas and Dalit Theology*, p. 18

a subject matter appropriate for doing theology in India'. It was this obliviousness towards the struggles of the Dalits that warranted the need for articulating a Dalit Theology. According to Nirmal:

> What is amazing is the fact that Indian theologians ignored the reality of the Indian church. While estimates vary, between 50% and 80% of all the Christians in India today are of scheduled caste origin …. If our theologians failed to see this in the past, there is all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing Dalit theology. [69]

Thus, the fact that no attention was paid to the oppression, sufferings, aspirations and cultural expressions of Dalits as ingredients of a truly indigenous theology was an important contributory factor to the emergence of Dalit theology.[70]

We have to understand that the primary concern of the 'upper caste' and brahminical theologians was to interpret their faith experiences in 'Indian' thought form (which again was predominantly based on their own upper caste upbringing). So, it is understandable that the caste-Christian interpreters used brahminical philosophical concepts such as *advaita* (Uphadhyaya) and *vishistadvaita* (Appasamy) to explicate Indian Christian theology.[71] Moreover, Indian Christian theology was also characterized by an apologetic quest to establish the Christian truth against Brahmoism and the theorizing of neo-vedantism. Thus, it had a strong apologetic element.[72] Christianity also had the challenge of incarnating itself as part of the national community.[73] Thus, in order to prove that Indian Christian theology was an integral part of an emerging national community a concerted effort was made to positively respond to the Brahmo demand for national Christianity, which ultimately led to the incorporation of concepts and symbols from the Brahminic tradition.[74] The nationalistic strivings of this era meant that emphasis was placed on the Hindu Christian characteristic of the Christian community's identity in India. Thus, what emerged at the end of the 19th century was 'the vision of a national Christian Church which would be a haven for Hindu-Christians, with the Hindu component seen primarily along Brahmannic Brahminic lines'.[75] Thus, the efforts of these upper-caste theologians brought together the cross-fertilization of caste Hindu and caste Christian theological efforts which produced a Brahminic-based Hindu-Christian theology.

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[69] Nirmal, 'Towards a Christian Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 214–30), pp. 215, 217.

[70] Chatterji, 'Why', pp. 196, 197.

[71] Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 230, 231. Watson also acknowledges this tendency. See also, Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, p. 59.

[72] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 38, 39.

[73] Thomas and Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology*, p. 4.

[74] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 37 ff.

[75] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 38, 39.

In a critical denouncement of Indian Christian Theology, Sathianathan Clarke not only scathingly critiques Indian Christian theology's hegemonic espousal of upper-caste interest but also accuses Indian Christian theology of functioning as an instrument of ideological co-option. His cogent analysis of Indian Christian Theology analyses its hegemonic influences on both Dalits and non-Dalits. He points out that the meta-narrative that has been woven combining the Christian story with the tradition of caste Hindus 'has tended to serve hegemonic purposes'.[76] What is inherent in the process of 'combining' these two was the elevation of the cultural and religious traditions of one dominant group of Christians to serve as the overall framework within which Christian theology was articulated. One has to be critically perceptive about the purposes and interests which this theology served. Within the realm of Indian-Christian theology one cannot doubt that this did not serve the hegemonic interests of the caste communities. From the perspective of the caste communities, they were presented with an opportunity 'to configure a normative master-narrative' which combined the heritage of their Hindu ancestors and the Christian story together.[77] However, there were temporal and 'short-term benefits' to the Christian Dalits. Having experienced oppression and discrimination because of their previous identity, they were now 'given an opening to mask their real identity and live with illusory conviction that they were truly part of the overall Hindu society and heritage'.[78] The problem with this was a subtle reinforcement of the belief that Dalits were inferior because of their Dalitness and caste communities were superior and hence their worldview should be acceptable as the normative worldview.

The issue of caste discrimination was also not tackled with seriousness by Indian Christian Theology. There was an obliviousness towards the struggles of the Dalits. Though post-independent theologians like M.M. Thomas had strong liberative underpinnings to their theology they did not pay specific attention to the plight of the Dalits and made broad categories like inter-faith dialogue and nation-building their focus.[79] What was propagated as the appropriate discourse for a 'just nation' was a secular and class-based discourse which meant that the caste-Hindu agenda was neither unveiled nor confronted.[80] The same can be said of abstract and grandiose notions like M.M. Thomas' concept of humanization. Drawing attention to the various criticisms regarding Thomas' lack of attention to the ejection of Dalits by the caste communities, which was a 'systematic, comprehensive, and hegemonic practice of indigenous colonization', Clarke says, 'For Thomas, who was a member of the dominant Syrian Christian (caste) community, to have missed this in some analytical (theological and anthropological) depth makes one wonder whether he

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[76] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

[77] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

[78] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 43.

[79] Masilamani Azariah, 'Doing Theology in India Today', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1991) (pp. 85–92), pp. 85, 86.

[80] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 39–40.

deliberately undercuts particular human beings and their concrete debilitation in valorizing the much more abstract notion of humanization'.[81] This critique of M.M. Thomas is pertinent and applicable to the whole of Indian Christian theology which failed to acknowledge the fact that 50 per cent and 80 per cent of all Christians in India were of Dalit origin which, being 'the most important commonality cutting across the various diversities of the Indian Church … would have provided an authentic liberation *motif* for Indian Christian theology'.[82] The fact that this was ignored had to be confronted and subverted. It was in this context that the need for a new form of theology having the Dalit struggles as its locus was perceived.

A growing critical consciousness acted as a catalyst for triggering a series of initiatives to systematically articulate Christian faith in interaction with the emerging Dalit aspiration for liberation and ultimately culminated in the emergence of Dalit theology. Though with the mass conversions of Dalits to Christianity during 1870–1960, Dalit Christian theology emerged as a confessional reality,[83] it was in no way considered as the dominant theological trend. However, there was an increasing perceptivity of the Dalit situation between 1975–1986, which were formative years where much reflection was carried on in relation to the Dalits.[84] In 1978 a joint National consultation of Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians was conducted in Bangalore on the theme 'Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin'.[85] A significant aspect of this consultation was a presentation by Masilamani Azariah to enlist the Church in the Dalits' struggle for justice. Azariah emphasized that the central concern of the God of the bible is for the prevalence of justice and righteousness and j esus' ministry was 'essentially for the victims of injustice and oppression'.[86] The Christian Institute for Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) organized a consultation in 1979 on 'Theology of the People' and called for theological reflection from and for the oppressed. The focus of this consultation wasn't specifically on the Dalits, but still it contributed to stimulating the emergence of Dalit theology.[87] Webster's paper 'From Indian Church to Indian Christian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction' in April 1981 at the United Theological College, Bangalore, pointed out the need to develop theologies which contained good news for Dalits because the social base of Indian Church was overwhelmingly Dalit.[88] This was an indication of the momentum that

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81 Sathianathan Clarke, 'M.M.Thomas', in Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and j oerg Rieger (eds), *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) (pp. 423–37), p. 436.

82 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 217. See also A.P. Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations* (Madras: CLS, 1990).

83 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 354.

84 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', pp. 353 ff. See also Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 230 ff.

85 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 357.

86 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, pp. 231–2.

87 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 361, Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 232.

88 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 233.

Christian theologizing in the Indian context was becoming more perceptive to its contextuality and thus paying attention to all those who had been relegated to the margins by previous modes of theologizing. The watershed event was Arvind P. Nirmal's address at the United Theological College, Bangalore, in March 1981. Titled 'Towards a Shudra Theology', Nirmal's address was a clarion call to the Dalits 'to shun theological passivity and sociological camouflage' so as to pick up the gauntlet of 'reclaiming the liberative ends of theology'. The tacit inclination towards theological sanskritization was confronted and a new way that put the motif of liberation at the centre was opened'.[89] Though Nirmal didn't use the word 'Dalit' in the paper, this paper provided a strong foundation for the Dalit theology which emerged subsequently. Kothapalli Wilson's work, *The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians* (1982), marked a clear shift in the direction of Indian Christian theology in the line of Dalit theology.[90] Wilson was especially critical of the 'salvation theology' of the Christian missions, which he argued promoted 'psychological dependency, political passivity and communal exclusiveness among Dalit Christians'.[91] Calling Christianity a cultural renascent movement committed to humanization, Wilson called for a shift from its supernatural and heavenly concern to involvement in humanizing struggles.[92] Though Wilson did not construct a Dalit theology, his critic of the salvation theological model of the existing theologies from a Dalit liberative perspective is very relevant for Dalit theologians.[93] Slowly, the emergence of the organizations like CDLM (Christian Dalit Liberation Movement), DLET (Dalit Liberation Education Trust) and other conferences facilitated the change in theological orientation, which led to the emergence of Dalit theology as an important theology. One has to acknowledge that though there is a dynamism in which Christian Dalit theology has developed, much of the core principles of Dalit theology can be discerned from a few important collections of essays which have been published so far: '*Towards a Dalit Theology'* (1988),[94] *Emerging Dalit Theology* (1990),[95] *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (1991),[96] and *Indigenous People: Dalits – Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate* (1994).[97] A few issues which were considered pertinent by Christian Dalit theologians during the formative period are: the engagement of the Church in the struggle of the Dalits (Azariah), critique of Brahminic modes of

89 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 45.

90 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 362, Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 235.

91 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 235.

92 Kothapalli Wilson, *The Twice-Alienated: Culture of Dalit Christians* (Hyderabad: Booklinks Cooperation, 1982), p. 59.

93 Rasquinha, 'A Brief', p. 363.

94 Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards*.

95 Xavier Irudayaraj (ed.), *Emerging Dalit Theology* (Madras: jesuit Theological Secretariat, 1990).

96 Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*.

97 Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People*.

Indian Christian Theology and a call for Dalit concerns, experiences and struggles to become the foundation for theology (Nirmal), the urgency to develop a theology which contained good news to the Dalits (Webster), and a call for a theology concerned with human struggles (Wilson). The paradigm shift that Dalit theology envisaged for the Indian Christian theological task was to decisively make Dalit issues the new locus of theologizing in India.

What are the Objectives of Dalit Theology?

If one is to talk about the objective or goal of Dalit theology one can mention a wide concept of liberation within which the priority for liberation of the Dalits can function as the specific goal of Dalit theology.[98] This is because not all Dalit theologians have confined Dalit theology to encompass Dalit issues alone. Prabhakar points to the universal scope of Dalit theology.[99] Chatterjee and Wilson[100] have also pointed out the possibility of Dalit theology encompassing the concerns of other oppressed groups like women and tribals.[101] For Prabhakar, liberation of the Dalits from their socio-economic and political bondage is the point of departure for Dalit theology. 'Dalit theology is *doing theology* in community within the context of the sufferings and struggles of Dalits through dialogue, critical reflection and committed action for building a new life-order'.[102] The emphasis on the 'doing' aspect of Dalit theology needs to be recognized here. The praxis of Dalit theology is understood in terms of socio-political and economic transformation. For A.P. Nirmal, the ultimate goal of Dalit theology is not 'simply gaining of the rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of (our) full humanness or conversely, (our) full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us'.[103] This involves affirmation of Dalit identity. Therefore, he defines Dalit theology as a theology of Dalit identity.[104] At the same time he

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[98] See Dionysius Rasquinha, 'A Critical Reflection on the Meaning of Dalit Christian Theology', in *VJTR*, Vol. 66, April 2002 (pp. 251–69).

[99] According to Prabhakar, 'dalit theology has to widen its concern to take account of the experiences of other oppressed groups like the tribals, women and other weaker sections of people; all these groups are linked in a chain of oppression created by the same set of theological-ideological presumptions of the dominant sections of society.' Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 203.

[100] For Wilson, Dalit refers more to the broken human condition, on the basis of which unity and solidarity can be fostered with other oppressed sections. See Rasquinha, 'A Critical', p. 256. See also Wilson, 'An Approach to Christian Dalit Theology', in Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards* (pp. 48–56).

[101] Rasquinha 'A Critical' (pp. 251–69).

[102] Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 211.

[103] Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 222. De-emphasis mine.

[104] A.P. Nirmal, 'Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 139–44), p. 143.

also maintains that 'Dalit theology must also be informed by a social vision which is liberative in character'.[105] Balasundaram understands 'identity' as a theological category and also identifies Dalit theology as 'basically a theology of identity'. For Balasundaram:

> (t)he goal of Dalit theology is the liberation of the Dalits and their empowerment, i.e., strengthening Dalits, providing comfort to them, the good news that God is with them in their struggle, that they are God's children and that they have their own God-given identity and that they are people with worth and dignity. That is, human dignity is more important than the question of economic emancipation.[106]

But Balasundaram also maintains that Dalit theology should be informed by a transforming social vision based on the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity.[107]

One can say at this point that two categories that constitute the content of liberation in Dalit theology are *liberative social vision* and *identity affirmation*. Though theologians like Nirmal and Balasundaram have placed emphasis on *identity affirmation* over economic emancipation and rights and privileges they have affirmed and acknowledged the importance and primacy of a *liberative social vision*. The proper understanding of the liberation motif in Dalit theology is one in which a dialectic between *identity affirmation* and *liberative social vision* is envisaged. One can also infer that praxis assumes a foundational primacy in their definition of Dalit theology, because the objectives that the theologians delineate for this theology unite faith to existential struggles. What is envisaged is a unity between theology and transformation.

The How of Dalit Theology

We have seen that liberation of the Dalits is the overall objective of Dalit theology. How does Dalit Theology seek to achieve this objective? The question of 'approach' in Dalit theology is inextricably interlinked with the question of 'agency' and its concomitant question: Who are the agents for Dalit liberation?

In answer to this question Massey recognizes that solidarity among Dalits (both Christian and non-Christian) is essential for Dalit struggle because 'only through a commitment to solidarity … they (Dalits) can generate power among themselves to face the challenge of their opponents'.[108] Prabhakar calls for an approach of

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[105] Nirmal, 'Doing', p. 144.

[106] Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle and its Implications for Theological Education', in *BTF*, Vol. XXIX, Nos 3 and 4, September and December 1997 (pp. 69–91), pp. 89–90.

[107] Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle', pp. 89–90.

[108] Massey, *Down Trodden*, p. 78.

mutuality across the caste divide within Christianity, where the middle and the upper strata of the Church have the obligation 'for extending their solidarity and actions with Dalits in achieving their liberation', and the Dalits need 'to seek for alliances with and solidarity of the non-Dalits in trust, friendliness and on an equal basis, maintaining their own leadership and initiatives'.[109] Wilson says that the Church in India should be open to 'join hands and work in cooperation with secular humanising forces'.[110] Nirmal also states that Dalits should be willing to accept help from 'all possible sources'.[111] Godwin Shiri also stresses the need for 'all possible alliances with other likeminded movements and groups irrespective of whether they are religious or secular; Dalit or non-Dalit'.[112] Therefore, partnership across caste and religious barriers is recognized as an important approach towards achieving liberation.

The question concerning the agency of liberation also determines, to a certain extent, the content of Dalit theology because it is also a question of the audience of Dalit theology. If Dalit theology 'hints at' a partnership of Christian Dalits with both non-Dalit Christians and non-Christian Dalits, does its theological articulation give space for discussing the contours of such partnerships? This direction of thought has not been totally neglected in Dalit theology and has received some, if not exhaustive, attention. Dhyanchand Carr, in his efforts to arrive at a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology, has attempted to systematize a paradigm which is dialogical both with the Dalits and the non-Dalits. Carr proposes the need for incorporation of both 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical' concerns in Dalit theological discourse if the gospel is to become relevant to the oppressed groups. According to Carr:

> Contextual theologies which seek to confront situations of oppression can at the same time hold together the ecumenical concern for one human community as well as the evangelical concern that God accepts everyone on the basis of genuine repentance. In other words by being open to Dalit theology, the non-Dalits also can feel included within the pale of salvation through conscious repentance of their past participation either directly or indirectly in the unjust structures, practices and attitudes produced and nurtured by the caste system.[113]

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[109] M.E. Prabhakar, 'Missions in a Dalit Perspective', in V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1992) (pp. 71–89), pp. 86–7.

[110] Kothapalli Wilson, 'A Dalit Theology of Human Self Development', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 263–76), p. 269. See also Kothapalli Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 151–68), p. 161.

[111] Nirmal, 'Doing', pp. 142, 143.

[112] Godwin Shiri, 'People's Movements – An Introspection as We Enter the 21st Century', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, Nos 1 and 2, March and june 1996 (pp. 119–38), p. 129.

[113] Dhyanchand Carr, 'A Biblical Basis for Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 231–49), p. 231.

Carr, in his quest to construct a biblical basis for Dalit theology, points to three practical features against which the relevance and validity of any theological paradigm can be tested. The features are: whether the paradigm provides for a challenge to the non-Dalits, whether it provides place for non-Dalits within the overall ambit of Dalit theology, whether it provides for an articulation of the messianic consciousness of the Dalits as the community chosen to take the gospel to the nations.[114] The features Carr proposes also concur with the five features postulated by Massey regarding the role of Dalit theology, which are: that Dalit theology has to address the Dalits about their state and consciousness; it has to address non-Dalits both within and outside the Church; it has to raise the consciousness of the Church and the Christian community as a whole and enable the church to become an instrument of change; it has to enable ordinary people to actively participate in the struggles of the Dalits; it needs to create the possibility of fuller liberation or salvation, which also models liberating their oppressors as they become instruments of establishing a just society. Thus, both Carr and Massey understand the role of Dalit theology as one which facilitates transformation within both Dalits and non-Dalits. It seems almost imperative for Dalit theology to impinge upon the behaviour of both Christian Dalits and non-Dalit Christians, and enlist and nurture all potential partnerships which will pave the way for the establishment of a just and egalitarian society. Thus, one can conclude that the praxis envisaged in Dalit theology is transformative and liberative for both Dalits and non Dalits. Moreover, it is a praxis of *liberative partnerships*.

Dalit Theology and Praxis – Interrogating the Integration

The dialectic between the what (objective/s) and how (approach/es) of Dalit theology can be said to constitute the praxiological framework of Dalit theology. While *Identity affirmation* and *liberative social vision* are the objectives of Dalit theology, *liberative partnerships* constitute the approach. It is now pertinent to explore how the theological content of Dalit theology relates to this praxiological framework. How has Dalit theological discourse integrated *identity affirmation*, *liberative social vision* and the question of *agency for liberation* (liberative partnerships) in its theological content? This question entails a closer examination of some of the salient features of Christian Dalit theology using these three categories of the Dalit praxiological framework as a prism.

Dalit Theology and Identity Affirmation

Dalit theology has been identified as a theology of identity. Its emergence needs to be perceived in relation to the Dalits' search for identity.[115] In its quest for a

[114] Carr, 'A Biblical Basis', p. 235.

[115] Devasahayam, *Doing*, p. 14.

new identity Dalit theology has, in general, focused upon Dalit Christology and theology, Dalit history, Dalit hermeneutics,[116] Dalit culture and religion. The subversive act of Dalit theology is to recognize 'the oppressed people as subjects of theology'.[117] Nirmal's answer to the self-imposed question 'what is Dalit theology?' helps us to recognize the important foci of the content Dalit theology. For Nirmal, Dalit theology is a theology from the Dalits, which will be produced by the Dalits. He says:

> It will be based on their own Dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations and their own hopes. It will narrate the story of their pathos and their protest against the socio-economic injustices they have been subjected to throughout history. It will anticipate liberation which is meaningful to them. It will represent a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian theology of the Brahminic tradition.[118]

This definition of Dalit theology brings out the centrality of Dalit identity for the theological task. It is a theology which takes Dalit story and Dalit struggles as important theological categories. Also significant is the component of representing a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian theology which perpetuated the Brahminic tradition. One of the characteristic features of Dalit theology was to critically confront the existing theological models from the perspective of the Dalits and reformulate and re-vision theology.[119] The implications of this meant that new sources of theology needed to be identified, and the progress of Dalit theology has shown that these sources were found in the culture, history and struggles of the Dalits. So it is not surprising that some perceived the very act of doing Dalit theology as a form of praxis. According to Prabhakar:

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[116] Massey and Prabhakar (eds), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*. See also V. Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Delhi/Madras: ISPCK, GLTCRI, 1997); P.A. Sampathkumar, 'Reading the Bible with Indian Eyes', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 3, September 1997 (pp. 98–111); A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Assertion of Periphery: Some Biblical Paradigms', in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 27, No. 157, 1997 (pp. 25–35); 'Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible: Some Hermeneutical Reflections', in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 26, No. 151, 1996 (pp. 29–34); 'The Authority of j esus: A Dalit Reading of Mark 11:27–33', in *Jeevadhara, A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. 25, 1995 (pp. 123–38); M. Gnanvaram, ' "Dalit Theology" and the Parable of the Good Samaritan', in *JSNT*, Vol. 50, 1993 (pp. 59–83); Carr, 'A Biblical Basis' (pp. 231–49).

[117] Devasahayam, *Doing*, p. 16.

[118] Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 219.

[119] George Oommen, 'The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal', in *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, j une 2000 (pp. 19–37).

> To speak of Dalit theology is a liberative action in itself, considering that theology has been for long the preserve of the elite, an academic discipline and an intellectual activity with little or no direct contact with realities experienced by people. It is a people's self affirmation of doing their own theology from within their own situation, for transforming them, with an alterative consciousness of the economics of equality, politics of justice, and religion of God's freedom.[120]

One of the areas in which reiteration of identity has been made is in the wider acceptance of the term Dalit by the Dalits themselves as a sign of self-affirmation of their subjecthood and a commitment to take control of their own history.[121] The affirmation of Dalit identity in Dalit theological articulation has taken place predominantly in relation to the areas of *history*, *culture* and *theology*.

Dalit History and Identity Affirmation The importance of history for the Dalits has been recognized by Dalit theologians. But the area of Dalit history, though integrally related to the question of identity, has often been a problematic one. This is because the histories of Dalits are predominantly based on oral traditions and are considered to be subjugated. Therefore theologians have pointed out the need for 'historical scholarship that is "interested" in Dalit issues and which will look at oral traditions more sympathetically and consider them as "alternative" historical sources'.[122] The 'difficulty of nurturing and strengthening Dalit identity and their struggle for liberation' while being estranged from any understanding of their history has been pointed out.[123]

Various theologians have dealt with the history of Dalits in recent times, especially the history of Dalit Christians. james Massey has brought out the history of the Dalits right from the time of Aryan invasions. He has drawn attention to the various aspects of Dalit history in his *Roots: A Concise History of Dalits*[124] and in his article 'Historical Roots'.[125] He has analysed the plight of the Dalits right from the Vedic period under *Aryan* rule. His research has also covered the Muslim period, the British period and the Post-Independence era. This also meant an in-depth analysis of society and the plight of the Dalits within Indian Church circles as well as the various governmental policies which have been brought up in relation to the Dalits and the critical historical review of the theological articulation related to Dalits. George Oommen has analysed the history of Dalits in Kerala and the developments

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120 Prabhakar, 'The Search', p. 213.

121 Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 13, 14.

122 Nirmal, 'Doing', p. 144.

123 Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalits Move Towards the Ideology of Nationality', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 169–80), p. 170.

124 james Massey, *Roots: A Concise History of Dalits* (2nd edn), (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994).

125 james Massey, 'Historical Roots', in james Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 3–55).

in their Dalit consciousness.[126] Godwin Shiri has recorded the liberation struggles of the Christian Dalits of Karnataka,[127] as well as the plight of Christian Dalits in general.[128] j ohn Webster initiated the attempts to write Dalit Christian history within the context of the modern Dalit movement. He portrayed the history of Christian theological reflection on the Dalit situation in his work *The Dalit Christians: A History*.[129] Dionysius Rasquinha has also analysed the development of Dalit theology from a historical perspective in two of his articles.[130] This interest in the documentation of Dalit histories can be argued to be the result of lessons learned from past experiences. Such writing of history draws attention to the submerged terrains of the Dalit situation and is crucial to the project of identity affirmation as it recovers the history of those who have been relegated to the margins of history.

Identity Affirmation and Dalit Culture Theologians have looked into various Dalit cultural resources like Dalit literature,[131] folk religion and folklore,[132] the religiosity of the Dalits[133] and stories of Dalit struggles[134] to articulate Christian Dalit theology.

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[126] George Oommen, 'Pulaya Christians of Kerala: A Community in a Dilemma', in George Oommen and j ohn C.B. Webster (eds.), *Local Dalit Christian History* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) (pp. 92–6); 'Dalits' Socio-Religious Aspirations and Christianity', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, j une and September 2004 (pp. 140–51); 'Majoritarian Nationalism and the Identity Politics of Dalits in Post-Independent India', in j oseph George (ed.), *The God of All Grace: Essays in Honour of Origen Vasantha Jathanna* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation and United Theological College, 2005) (pp. 338–50).

[127] Godwin Shiri, 'In Search of Roots: Christian Dalits in Karnataka and their Struggles for Liberation', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XL, No. 4 December 1993 (pp. 28–35).

[128] Nora and Godwin Shiri, 'Dalits and Christianity' (pp. 99–116).

[129] Webster, *The Dalit Christians.*

[130] See Rasquinha's 'A Critical' (pp. 251–69) and 'A Brief' (pp. 353–70).

[131] Some theologians and writers have also used the poems of Telugu Dalit Christian poet Gurram j ashuva. See P. Swarnalatha Ranjan 'Christian Dalit Aspirations as Expressed by j ashuva Kavi in Gabbilam (The Bat)', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 324–30); M.E. Prabhakar, 'In Search of Roots – Dalit Aspirations and the Christian Dalit Question (Perceptions of the Andhra Poet Laurete, j oshua), in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 1 March,1994 (pp. 2–20); 'Women and Gender Equality: Towards an Authentic Spirituality – Theologizing with Poet j ashuva', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1, March 1995 (pp. 29–48). Prabhakar uses different spellings for the author's name.

[132] Elizabeth j oy, 'Folklore: A New Hermeneutical Key for Dalit Womanist Theology', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September 1998 (pp. 101–14).

[133] j ames Theophilus Appavoo, 'Dalit Religion', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 111–21); Elisha, 'Liberative Motifs' (pp. 78–88).

[134] Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, 'Skin, Body and Blood: Explorations for Dalit Hermeneutics', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, j une and September 2004 (pp. 106–20).

Two theologians, A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel[135] and Sathianathan Clarke, have consistently affirmed the need to take Dalit culture seriously. Ayrookuzhiel views Dalit theology as 'the sum of Dalit meanings, expectations and understandings in relation to their experience of social reality and their perception of what it is to lead an authentic human existence'.[136] Ayrookuzhiel argues that Dalit theology should play a cultural role through which the dominant religious traditions and their dehumanizing potential should be denounced through critical analysis and counter-cultural models be lifted up as useful and relevant.[137] According to Ayrookuzhiel, the way forward for the Church to engage in ministry with the Dalits is to search 'for roots in terms of theological-ideological resources'.[138] This involves 'gathering the positive cultural traditions and values counter to the Brahminic hierarchical values of legitimation of the old power relations' which can be found in the scattered popular traditions of the powerless.[139] Ayrookuzhiel analyses how relations of power have been legitimized on the basis of Brahminical or Hindu religio-cultural tradition and points out how the coalescence between these traditions and political power led to the enforcement of religious discrimination.[140] Drawing attention to the counter-cultural movements which emerged in opposition to Brahminical religion, Ayrookuziel delves into the religion and culture of various Dalit communities and identifies the following resistive features within them: gods and goddesses who condemn caste and preach a religion of common human values; rituals denouncing caste; many anti-brahminical proverbs; evidences to show that Dalit communities 'had proprietary rights and priestly privileges associated with gods and temples which are now under caste control'.[141] Ayrookuzhiel's objective is to point to the

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[135] See Godwin Shiri, 'Study of Religion: Ayrookuzhiel's Search for a New Approach in the Context of Dalit Struggle', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, No. 3, September 1998 (pp. 39–53). See also A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 'Distinctive Characteristics of Folk Traditions: A Proposal for the Study of the Religious Heritage of the Dalits: Some Methodological Considerations', in Gnana Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised: Towards a Phenomenology and the Methodology of Study* (Bangalore/Delhi: The United Theological College/ISPCK, 1998), (pp. 1–17). This article was a modified version the article 'A Proposal for the Study of Religious Heritage of the Dalits: Some Methodological Considerations', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 1, March 1995 (pp. 17–28); See also other writings of Ayrookuzhiel: 'Chinna Pulayan: The Dalit Teacher of Sankaracharya', in Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised* (pp. 18–34); 'Religious Legitimations and Delegitimations of Social Relations of Power (Of Caste): The Case of Dalits in Historical Perspective', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. XL, No. 4, December 1993 (pp. 3–15); 'Dalit Theology: A Movement of Counter-Culture', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 250–66).

[136] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalit Theology', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 250–66), p. 250.

[137] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Dalit Theology' (pp. 265–6).

[138] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', p. 15.

[139] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', p. 15.

[140] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', p. 5.

[141] Ayrookuzhiel, 'Religious Legitimations', pp. 12–15.

'anti-caste cultural ethos' among popular traditions of the Dalits and recover them as valuable resources for Dalit theology.

Sathianathan Clarke, like Ayrookuzhiel, also advocates a serious consideration of the religious and cultural world of the Dalits in the articulation of Dalit theology.[142] For Clarke engagement with 'the already internalised religious world-picture of the marginalised people' is an important constitutive liberational element which needs to be taken seriously by Dalit theology.[143] He is critical of the two ways in which Dalits have responded to the course of Indian Christian Theology, namely 'Sanskritization' and liberationism. Clarke argues that liberationism is not suitable for Dalit theology because the focus is, on the one hand, parochially limited to the social and economic realms of life, while on the other hand it ignores contextual complexities and tries to interpret liberation in universalist terms which find commonality with the various oppressed communities throughout the globe.[144] He also critiques the failure of liberationism to pay adequate attention to utilize traditional representations of the knowledge of God.[145] In his own work, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India,* he uses the Dalit symbolic world to apprehend j esus Christ. He creatively interprets the resistive and the constructive dimensions of Dalit religion by analysing two important symbols of Dalit religion – the goddess *Ellaiyamman* and the Dalit drum. Considering the fact that the Dalit drum is a symbolic representation of the Dalits' collective expression and experience of the divine, Clarke explicates a Christology of the Dalit drum and interprets Christ as drum. By working out his Christology according to the 'dictates of those who have been silenced in theological discourse,' Clarke valorizes 'a particularly slighted and scorned perspective of interpreting j esus'.[146] He also corrects the misapprehension and misconception that Dalit religion is demonic by exposing the Christic presence in the religious tradition of the Dalits. The focus of Clarke's theology is the liberation of subaltern theology itself through the process of incorporating the symbolic representations of the Dalit understanding of the divine in the explication of a Christology. By adopting an approach which affirms Dalit culture and religion, Clarke's theological expositions are useful at various levels. It initiates the process of justifying the

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[142] See Clarke's *Dalits and Christianity*, also 'Reviewing the Religion of the Paraiyars: Ellaiyamman as an Iconic Symbol of Collective Resistance and Emancipatory Mythography', in Robinson (ed.), *Religions of the Marginalised* (pp. 35–53); 'Subaltern Culture as Resource for People's Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December 1997 (pp. 84–105); 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religion and a Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity', in *Religion and Society,* Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, j une and September 2004 (pp. 30–48).

[143] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 46.

[144] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 45.

[145] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 46–7.

[146] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 185.

search for subjugated knowledge among marginalized communities. It enriches the process and content of theology by systematically recalling and creatively remembering the silenced voices within the contours of social discourse in the process re-inscribing what constitutes acceptable or appropriate knowledge.[147] It provides a critique to Christian theology's biblicalism and culture and orality which appear to aid the colonizing and the demonizing of the working of God within the religions of orality.[148]

Dalit Identity Affirmation Through Theological Motifs and Paradigms Several Dalit theologians have recognized Dalit identity as an important theological category, and explicated various theological motifs and paradigms which creatively engage the issue of Dalit identity affirmation.[149] Nirmal introduces the concept of historical Dalit consciousness as the primary datum for a Christian Dalit theology because it is related to the question of Dalit identity and implies recognition of Dalit roots. Only by grappling with the question of roots, can one understand Dalit identity in its entirety, which is inseparably bound up with the sense of belonging to a community. Nirmal feels that the historical Dalit consciousness helps in achieving a community-consciousness, which further facilitates the formulation of a communitive vision. If Dalit theology has to be authentic it has to be informed by this historical Dalit consciousness.[150] Nirmal's contention is that historical Dalit consciousness depicts the unparalled depth of pain and pathos of the Dalits. For Dalit theology, pain or 'pathos' is the beginning of knowledge because for the sufferers their pain is 'more certain than' any principle, proposition, thought or action.[151] Because 'it is in this pain-pathos that the sufferer knows God', this experience of pain or pathos should become the epistemological starting point for the Dalits' knowledge of God. However, what is important to note is that Nirmal is not actually advocating passive acceptance of pathos. He emphasizes that this pathos should give birth to protest which is so loud as to break down the walls of Brahminism.[152] This becomes clear if we pay attention to Nirmal's explication of the historic Deuteronomic creed found in Deuteronomy 26: 5–12 as being paradigmatic for Dalit theology. The Deuteronomic creed is mentioned in conjunction with the 'exodus experience' (which is important for Latin American and Black Liberation theologies) and is expounded in full by Nirmal who, while drawing out its implications for Dalit theology, goes on to passionately bring out the distinctiveness of the Dalit situation as follows:

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147 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 12.

148 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 13.

149 See K.P. Aleaz, 'In Quest of a Dalit Theology', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, june and September 2004 (pp. 75–97), p. 77; Nirmal, 'Doing Theology', p. 143.

150 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 220.

151 Nirmal, 'Doing ', p. 141.

152 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 222.

> The historical Dalit consciousness in India depicts even greater and deeper pathos than is found in the deuteronomic creed. My Dalit ancestor did not enjoy the nomadic freedom of the wandering Aramean. As an outcaste, he was also cast out of his/her village. The Dalit bastis (localities) were always and are always on the outskirts of the Indian village. When my Dalit ancestor walked the dusty roads of his village, the Sa Varnas tied a tree-branch around his waist so that he would not leave any unclean foot-prints and pollute the roads. The Sa Varnas tied an earthen pot around my dalit ancestor's neck to serve as a spittle. If ever my Dalit ancestor tried to learn Sanskrit or any sophisticated language, the oppressors gagged him permanently by pouring molten lead down his throat. My dalit mother and sisters were forbidden to wear any blouses and the Sa Varnas feasted their eyes on their bare bosoms. The Sa Varnas denied my Dalit ancestor any access to public wells and reservoirs. They denied him the entry to their temples and places of worship…. My Dalit consciousness therefore, has an unparalleled depth of pathos and misery and it is this historical dalit consciousness, this dalit identity that should inform my attempt at a Christian Dalit theology.[153]

Nirmal identifies certain important features of the Deuteronomic creed, explicates their concomitant implications, and integrates them to the wider process of identity affirmation. For example, the importance of *calling to memory the roots* of the people who have experienced the Exodus liberation is recognized as a primary category for Dalit theology, because Dalit theology, being a truly confessional theology, has to deal with the question of roots, identity and consciousness.[154] In the same manner, the *representative nature* of the wandering Aramean is also explicated in terms of 'the sense of belonging to a community'. The description of the Aramean ancestor in plural terms, as 'few in number', is argued as being representational of the entire community. The implications of this mean the affirmation of community-consciousness and recognition that the vision of a Dalit theology ought to be a communitive vision.[155] Further, the importance of *recalling their affliction* and story of bondage is pointed out. The implication of this for Dalit theology is that 'a genuinely Dalit theology will be characterised by pathos, by suffering'. The Exodus liberation is symbolized by '*a mighty hand*', 'an outstretched arm' and by terror. For Nirmal, this implies that a certain measure of 'terror' is necessary to achieve liberation. In this way, Nirmal employs the Deuteronomic creed as a paradigm which will affirm the identity of the Dalits and, in the process also, usher in Dalit liberation.

Dalit Christology and Identity Affirmation This is another area through which Dalit identity is affirmed. The articulation of Dalit Christology is inextricably

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153 Nirmal, 'Towards', pp. 221–2.

154 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 220.

155 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 221.

interlinked with the issue of Dalitness. According to Prabhakar, 'What the Dalits think of j esus Christ and God's saving act in and through him is integrally linked with their dehumanised social existence and their hope for a future in Christ, freed from all inhumanity and justice'.[156] When we talk of Dalit Christology or Christology in a Dalit perspective, we are talking of a Christology that can create within the Dalits a realization, a 'consciousness' of their own intrinsic worth, 'their full humanness' through Christ. This new-found consciousness can in turn instil in the minds of the Dalits a new sense of dignity.[157] What is implicit in Dalit Christology is the attempt to make the Dalits realize their own humanness and dignity through the Dalitness of j esus Christ.[158] There is an emphasis on the affirmation that j esus Christ himself was a Dalit.[159] Nirmal emphasizes j esus' Dalitness as 'the key to the mystery of his divine human unity'.[160] j esus' Dalitness is emphasized through references to his socio-cultural and economic locatedness. Attention is paid to his 'mixed ancestry' through reference to the Matthean genealogy, where, among j esus' ancestors, the names of Tamar the daughter-in-law of j udah, Rahab the harlot, King Solomon an illegitimate child of David are mentioned as being suggestive of j esus' Dalit conditions.[161] The pejorative references to j esus as a carpenter's son are also pointed out. The Son of Man sayings, which speak of the Son of Man as encountering rejection, mockery, contempt, suffering and finally death, are also used to emphasize j esus' Dalitness.[162] Nirmal's attempt is to make the image of the Dalit Christ acceptable in its quintessence if not in its reality by pointing to j esus' taking on himself the 'pain' and 'pathos' of the oppressed while suffering on the cross.[163] The cross and the resurrection become metaphors for the victory of j esus over the shackles that suppress and discriminate against the suffering ones. They also become metaphors of j esus' own identification with the outcasts and thus symbols of liberation. The other important features which have informed Dalit Christology so far are j esus' identification with the Dalits of his day through his open commensality as well as the Nazareth manifesto in the gospel according to Luke which brings out j esus' preferential option for the poor. The Nazareth manifesto is used to emphasize the point that 'the gospel j esus brought was the gospel for "Dalits" and not for non-Dalits'.[164] References are also made to j esus' cleansing of the temple, which is interpreted as 'a prefiguration of the vindication of the Indian Dalit struggle for their prayer and worship rights'.[165]

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156 Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 405.

157 See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 420–24.

158 See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 402–32.

159 See also Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 414–20.

160 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 225.

161 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 226.

162 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 226.

163 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 225.

164 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 227.

165 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 229.

Dalit Christology cannot be understood in isolation from the way in which God in Christ is understood as the suffering servant. The God whom Jesus revealed is identified as a servant God by Nirmal.[166] This is the image which is acknowledged by Prabhakar as the most radical of Nirmal's statements on Dalit theology, which has a direct bearing on Dalit Christology.[167] Let us look at the way Nirmal explicates the Dalit God:

> But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God – a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India. The passages from Manu *Dharma Sastra* say that the Shudra was created by the self-existent (*Svayambhu*) to do servile work and that servitude is innate in him. Service is the *Sva-dharma* of the Shudra. Let us remember the fact that in Dalits we have peoples who are *avarnas* – those below the Shudras. Their servitude is even more pathetic than that of the Shudras. Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the *Svayambhu* does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. *Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the sva-dharma of the God; and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.*[168]

The attempts of Nirmal to identify God by using servant language is to recognize and identify God as 'a truly Dalit deity'. This is an act of affirming the humanity of the Dalits even in their own servanthood. Nirmal says that by taking up the traditionally impure jobs Dalits have 'participated in this servant-God's ministries'.[169] He goes on to identify Jesus as the suffering servant of Isaiah. The language used for this servant God is the language of pathos, the language which mirrors the pathos of the Dalits.[170] Nirmal makes hermeneutical purchase of this servant image to affirm the Dalitness of the Dalits through this commonality of pathos and servanthood.

Devasahayam also accords messianic value to the Dalits because they manifest messianic values which counter caste values. According to him, Jesus 'focuses more sharply on the poor, meek, the sorrowful and the persecuted as the agents of God's redemptive activity'.[171] The implicit reference to the beatitudes is made clearer as Devasahayam delves into the depth of the meanings of the words poor, meek and sorrowful and persecuted. According to Devasahayam, the poor, the meek, the sorrowful and the persecuted are 'the ones made powerless' and 'those

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166 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.
167 Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 224.
168 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.
169 Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.
170 Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 225.
171 Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 24, 25.

who have been domesticated to serve the purposes of their oppressors'.[172] 'Jesus identifies the 'servant' as a messianic category'. The Dalits become a messianic community because they embody servanthood in their daily lives.[173]

Another image of the Dalit Christ is based on Christ's feeling of being 'God-forsaken' in the midst of his intense agony on the cross. This is also related to Dalit pathos. Jesus' Dalitness is best symbolized by the cross. Jesus becomes Dalit in the fullest possible meaning of that term as 'the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven asunder man'.[174] The feeling of God forsakenness is reflected in Jesus' cry, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me'. The feeling of being God-forsaken is the core of Dalit experience and consciousness.[175] By sharing in this experience, Jesus becomes a Dalit and this is another example of Dalit Christology based on the epistemological premise of pain and pathos. Dalit Christology has consistently identified Jesus as a Dalit and as a suffering servant in terms of Jesus' brokenness, which mirrors the brokenness of the Dalits. It is through this brokenness that God's glory will be made manifest. Prabhakar makes theological purchase out of the etymological understanding of the word Dalit as 'manifested or displayed' as follows:

> (Another) group of meanings associated with the term 'Dalit' is 'manifested or displayed'. It is through us that God will manifest and display His salvation. It is precisely in and through the weaker, the downtrodden, the crushed, the oppressed and the marginalised that God's saving glory is manifested or displayed. This is because brokenness belongs to the very being of God. God's divinity and humanity are both characterised by His Dalitness.[176]

There is a heavy reliance on James Cone's articulation of a theology of Black liberation as Prabhakar goes on to characterize Dalit suffering as redemptive suffering.[177] Prabhakar argues for Dalit suffering as a conscious and representative suffering on the behalf of a frail humanity, as he draws its implications for the Indian Church as follows:

> There is a tremendous thought that the Indian untouchables (Dalits) suffer on behalf of the frail Indian humanity. It becomes then a Dalit vocation for 'redemptive suffering', to renew and liberate a new humanity out of the rigid

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[172] Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Delhi/Madras: ISPCK/GLTCRI, 1997), p. 25.

[173] Devasahayam, *Doing*, pp. 25, 26.

[174] Nirmal uses these words in the essay to define the Dalits, hence they are to be understood as indicators of Dalit identity. See Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 214.

[175] Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 229.

[176] Prabhakar, 'Christology in Dalit Perspective', in V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Madras/Delhi: GLTCRI and ISPCK, 1997) (pp. 402–32), p. 222.

[177] See Prabhakar, 'Christology', pp. 415 (n. 25 and 26), 417 (n. 29), 422–3 (n.30–33).

> oppressive caste society! This insight can be potentially followed up within the Church to renew the entire Christian community, pervaded by the Hindu caste-ethos.[178]

At the end of our analysis of Dalit Christology, we can conclude that Dalit Christology is predominantly articulated by accentuating the convergence of pathos experience of j esus and the Dalits. There is a thoroughgoing emphasis on j esus' Dalitness. An integral link between Dalit Christology and Dalit theological anthropology can also be discerned. The language of agency is also implicit whenever Dalits are accorded a messianic identity, by virtue of their brokenness through which God's salvation and glory will be made manifest. The primary intention of all those theologians who have dealt with Dalit Christology is to identify j esus Christ as a God who participates in Dalitness.

Dalit Theology and Liberative Social Vision and Agency

The contours of the *liberative social vision* of Dalit theology and the agency for that vision can be discerned in all those articulations which have called for a socio-political involvement in the Dalit issue. With regard to this some of the issues which have received attention were the struggles for securing protective discrimination in the form of Scheduled Caste benefits to Christian Dalits,[179] as well as the challenge of overcoming caste discrimination within the Churches. However, Dalit theology has just *mentioned* these two issues consistently. Not much theological reflection has been done upon these issues.

The theological content of Dalit theology with regard to its *liberative social vision* and *agency* has been predominantly concerned with the praxis of the Indian Church. In order to have an overview of Dalit theology's *liberative social vision* it is pertinent to analyse the theological views of a few theologians. For Masilamani Azariah, a former bishop in the Church of South India (CSI), a theology relevant to the cause of the Dalits emerges from those Christian thinkers and activists 'who, in loyalty to j esus have inserted themselves in the life of the people and as partners in their struggle for justice'.[180] Azariah defines Christianity as a scheme of life in society, whose circumference, radius and centre are Christ.[181] He envisages a pastoral role for the Church in relation to the Dalits, which involves the ministry of healing the 'wounded psyche' of the Dalits that is the result of an inferiority-consciousness imposed upon the Dalits. Only through solidarity with Dalits can

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178 Prabhakar, 'Christology', p. 223.

179 M.E. Prabhakar, 'The Politics of Religious Discrimination and the Christian Dalit Question', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September 1998 (pp. 54–83).

180 Azariah, 'Doing Theology', p. 88.

181 See, M. Azariah, *The Unchristian Side of the Indian Church* (Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1989).

the church in India work towards the emancipation of the Dalits.[182] The mode of praxis delineated by the jesuit theologian Samuel Rayan is also the praxis of solidarity and identification with the Dalits by the Church. Rayan uses Hebrews 13:11–13, as a biblical paradigm for the Church to engage in the Dalit issue.[183] The biblical passage is as follows:

> The bodies of the animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for the atonement of sin are burnt outside the camp; and so jesus too suffered outside the gate to sanctify the people with his own blood. Let us go to him, then, outside the camp and share his degradation/shame.

According to Rayan, the passage talks about the praxis of jesus, suffering outside the camp. It is the story of jesus, and in him God, immersing themselves in ‘the Dalitness of the oppressed in order to rescue its victims and plant them in the realm of freedom, dignity and creative living’.[184] The uncompromising and radical invitation to join jesus outside the camp and share jesus’ degradation and death in the outcast place is ‘what stamps us and our Church with the Christian character’.[185] The praxis of jesus makes it clear that ‘discipleship and churchhood did not consist in sharing his throne of glory, but in sharing his cup of suffering, the baptism of his humiliation and the distress of his passion in an act of befriending and participating in their condition and giving our life for their liberation’.[186] Appropriating the invitation to follow jesus in Hebrews to the Dalit situation Rayan says:

> Hebrews 13 urges us and the church to go outside the camp and share the degradation of jesus and his friends, the jobs and the suffering servants of our times. Not in order to romanticize Dalitness, but to subvert it by loving the oppressed, rebuilding their pride, and enable them to struggle to equality and freedom.[187]

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[182] M. Azariah, ‘The Church’s Healing Ministry to the Dalits’, in *Indigenous People: Dalits* (pp. 316–23). Also see *Towards a Dalit Theology* (pp. 113–21).

[183] This paradigm was used by Rayan in the article ‘Outside the Gate: Sharing the Insult’, in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. 11, No. 63, May and june 1981 (pp. 216–28). Rasquinha doesn’t consider Rayan’s theology as Dalit Christian theology but places it among *‘important steps towards* the concept and practice of Dalit Christian Theology’. See Rasquinha, ‘A Brief’, p. 362. However, a later article by Rayan used the same biblical paradigm and was part of a collection of essays published after the ‘emergence and establishment’ of Dalit Theology as a distinct theology. See Samuel Rayan, ‘The Challenge of the Dalit Issue’, in Devasahayam (ed.), *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1992) (pp. 117–37).

[184] Rayan, ‘The Challenge’, p. 121.

[185] Rayan, ‘The Challenge’, p. 121.

[186] Rayan, ‘The Challenge’, p. 121.

[187] Rayan, ‘The Challenge’, p. 131.

According to Rayan, relating liberationally to Dalits is an essential component of faith. The Church is Christian to the extent in which Christ's option for Dalits and Christ's actions for liberation are relived.[188] 'The invitation of Hebrews to share jesus' degradation outside the gate implies a socio-cultural revolution, however tiny or fragmentary, that would liberate the Dalits and make them heirs to a world of new relationships where everyone's dignity and rights are honoured and upheld.'[189] He also makes references to jesus' open commensality, jesus' transcendence of racial and gender prejudices in his interaction with the Samaritan woman and jesus' servant leadership when delineating the role of the Church in the process of Dalit liberation.[190]

james Massey also addresses the issue of the liberative social vision for Dalit theology in his article 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue'.[191] He addresses the issue of the discrimination of Dalits within the Church.[192] He considers the Dalit problem to be more theological than social and argues for attention to be paid to biblical models to deal with the issue.[193] The complete model which covers all aspects of Dalits according to him is the 'incarnational model', the best summary of which could be found in john 1:1,2,14. Massey along with Azariah and Rayan also emphasizes identification with the Dalits and engaging alongside them in their struggles. For Massey:

> In the incarnational model we meet a real 'Dalit' who became himself the Poorest of the poor as a human being (a Dalit) to make all the Dalits of this world rich (II Corinthians 8:9). This model challenges us (and this includes the churches) to re-discover the lost identity of God which he took upon Himself….
> Re-discovering or agreeing with this model means taking part in the struggle of Dalits. It also means taking a risk, losing our own identity and also shunning our inherited understanding of the Christian faith. This also means accepting and recognising the problem of Dalits, both within the church as well as in society, both spiritually and socially.[194]

Like Massey, Dalit theologian T.Victor also stresses the example of jesus' preferential option for the poor when he deals with the question of Christian

188 Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 132.

189 Rayan, 'The Challenge', p. 123.

190 Rayan, 'The Challenge', pp. 122, 123.

191 james Massey, 'The Role of the Churches in the Whole Dalit Issue', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 41, No. 1, March 1994 (pp. 44–50).

192 Massey, 'The Role', pp. 48, 49.

193 With regard to this, Massey makes references to the stories of Gideon (judges: Chapters 6, 7, 8), Hannah (I Samuel: Chapters 1, 2) and the story of Mary (Luke: Chapter 1).

194 Massey, 'The Role', p. 50.

commitment to the subalterns.[195] The term 'subaltern' is identified by Victor as being 'synonymous with the modern usage of Dalit in a wider sense'.[196] Victor's understanding of j esus' praxis is that 'j esus comes heavily on those who exploit the poor, displace the weak and deny their humanity'. Recognizing the main suffering of the subalterns as 'unbearable humiliation, dehumanization, loss of self respect, self-esteem and human dignity inflicted by the elite, the exploiters', Victor points out that j esus' life was 'a life of option for the poor and oppressed who found their thirst for recognition and identity as human persons fulfilled by him and in him'.[197] In the same way in the present context of the subaltern's 'search for their true identity and thirst for the recognition of their human dignity', Victor identifies four important characteristics for Christian commitment and mission to the subalterns. They are: 'Promoting solidarity with the subalterns as j esus did', which involves breaking all barriers; redefining the mission to subalterns which involves not giving priority to numerical addition but to the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the kingdom values; assuring non-Christian communities that our philanthropic activity is not intended to proselytize; becoming involved in translating the recent awakening and upsurge of the various subaltern groups into one mighty national movement, through political education. [198] This language of preferential option or bias is also employed by New Testament scholar Dhyanchand Carr. On the basis of his interpretation of God's election of Israel and the Matthean portrayal of the Galilean option of j esus, Carr concludes that Matthew provides the most comprehensive biblical paradigm for Dalit theology, because 'it affirms God's bias towards the socially ostracized and stigmatized groups'.[199] Another Indian liberation theologian William Madtha identifies the core of Dalit theology as 'not *logos* but *praxis* that is liberative'.[200] j esus' victimhood as well as priesthood are identified by Madtha as a peak experience of the consequence of j esus' option for the poor, and discipleship entails learning to encounter God in their commitment to the Dalits.[201] Some of the principles of praxis identified by Madtha are: being

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[195] T. Victor, 'Christian Commitment and Subaltern Perspectives', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, j une and September 2004 (pp. 98–105).

[196] Victor, 'Christian Commitment', p. 101.

[197] Victor, 'Christian Commitment', p. 103.

[198] Victor, 'Christian Commitment', pp. 104–5.

[199] Dhyanchand Carr, 'Dalit Theology is Biblical and it Makes the Gospel Relevant', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 71–83), p. 82. See also 'A Biblical Basis' (pp. 23–49).

[200] William Madtha, 'Dalit Theology: Voice of the Oppressed', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 277–94), p. 278.

[201] Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', p. 285.

poor for the poor (voluntary poverty), protest for honesty, cultural revolution,[202] good news to the poor.[203]

On the basis of our survey of the why, what and how of Dalit theology we realized that dalit theology rose through an increasing awareness of the Discrimination against Dalits within both Indian Christianity and Indian Christian Theology. The aim of Dalit theology is liberation of the Dalit communities. The proper understanding of the liberation motif in Dalit theology is one in which a dialectic between *identity affirmation* and *liberative social vision* is envisaged. Practical liberation is envisaged through a praxis of partnerships. We also interrogated the correspondence between the theological content of Dalit theology and its praxiological framework. It is clear that the *liberative social vision* of Dalit theology has so far been inextricably linked with the praxis of j esus and the praxis of the Church. The model of praxis for the Church is analogically derived from the praxis of j esus and is predominantly a *praxis of solidarity* with the marginalized and oppressed. The Church is understood mainly in terms of the 'non-Dalit' Church and hence there is recourse to the language of solidarity and identification with the 'them' – the Dalits. This is significant considering the fact that the majority of the Christians are Dalits. However, this is only one of the several issues which render the practical potential of Dalit theology questionable. Therefore, it is proposed to undertake a fuller and a more in-depth analysis of Dalit theology in the next chapter.

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[202] According to Madtha, Dalit theology generates a cultural revolution which stresses the equality of all. Madtha takes a giant, unconvincing and ambiguous leap to say that this 'cultural revolution is shaped authentically by the Dalits themselves in an ongoing fashion through political commitment'. The question how Dalit theology has generated this cultural revolution in the first place and how the agency of Dalits is assumed is left unanswered. Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', p. 290.

[203] Madtha, 'Dalit Theology', pp. 286–92.

Chapter 2
Questioning Some Answers – Critical Analysis of Dalit Theology

Having now gained answers to the why, what and the how of Dalit theology, there is need to question whether the theological content of Dalit theology warrants the practical efficacy of Dalit theology? The question of practical efficacy of Dalit theology entails a critical and in-depth revisiting of the praxiological framework of Dalit theology with an intention of identifying issues which may be pertinent to the discussion of the practical efficacy of Dalit theology.

The Question of Ethical Framework

The persistence of caste discrimination within the Indian Church is a well-documented issue.[1] In such a context we need to ask whether Dalit theology has offered an ethical framework to evaluate the foundations on which caste-based discrimination is validated and perpetuated. Though one cannot make Dalit theology entirely responsible for the slow progress with regard to Dalit emancipation, one should not refrain from critically evaluating the pertinence of Dalit theology in enabling a change in Christian attitude towards the caste-based discrimination.

It is important for theologians who are engaged in exploring ways of understanding and communicating liberation to pay attention to the nature of the oppression.[2] The basis on which the oppression is legitimized should be scrutinized. A pertinent question which needs to be analysed is – how do the oppressors acquire the power to discriminate?[3] Pointing out the need for liberation theology to focus on the 'elusive forces that promote discrimination and oppression', Dayanandan says:

> Theologians (and social scientists as well) must expose and reveal the nexus that exists between two major demonic forces that give power to oppression and discrimination, namely: prejudice and elitism. Power itself cannot be properly understood without comprehending the role of prejudice and elitism in providing

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[1] George Oommen, 'Dalits' Socio-Religious Aspirations and Christianity', in *R & S*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, june and September 2004 (pp. 140–51), p. 150.

[2] Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

[3] Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

> religious and institutional sanctions for all forms of discrimination. Prejudice and elitism also lead to pride a vice that adds to the power of the oppressor.[4]

We have already argued in the Introduction that it is pertinent to talk about the notions of purity and pollution as being relevant and foundational for the discrimination against the Dalits. The nexus between prejudice and elitism in the Indian caste situation can be best understood through the notions of purity and pollution. However, Dalit theology has not taken up the pedagogic function of pointing to Christian ethical principles on the basis of which caste-based discrimination can be morally assessed. One of the failures of Dalit theology is that no sufficient study has been conducted so far on the far-reaching consequences of the notions of purity and pollution and the influence they wield on the 'caste psyche' with regard to the Indian caste system. Rather there has been a simplistic 'causal linkage' between notions of purity and pollution and caste based discrimination. The result of this has been that the Indian Church has neither engaged with the root cause of the discrimination nor come up with a relevant theological or ethical basis to evaluate it and respond to it. In the light of this lack of Christian moral restraints on discrimination, it is easy to understand why the Church has been ineffective in addressing the cause of Dalits. On this basis it can be claimed that one of the reasons for the failure of Dalit theology to impact Christian attitudes towards Dalit discrimination is due to the lack of ethical guidelines to direct people's response to caste. The lacuna between theology and action can effectively be bridged through an ethical framework, which will help Christians to rethink their attitudes to caste from a Christian perspective. Dalit theology should offer space to derive the predicates of the obligatory which constitute an ethical response to caste-based discrimination. So it becomes imperative for Dalit theology to offer an ethical framework to engage with caste.

The Question of Dalit Agency

Theologians who have focused on the liberative social vision of Dalit theology have focused on the praxis of the 'Church'. The imagined identity of the Church seems to be predominantly 'non-dalit', which is perhaps why Dalit theologians have constantly identified the 'Church' as one which is *to stand in solidarity with* the Dalits. The very fact that Dalits constitute the majority of the Indian Church, which makes their role in the Church's praxis crucial, is not adequately recognized. Therefore, nothing much has been said about the role of the Dalits in their own liberation. One cursory glance at Dalit theology helps us to recognize that no paradigm for praxis has been delineated to enthuse the Dalits to work towards liberation along with the non-Dalits. It is this failure to recognize and articulate relevantly the agency of Dalits for liberation which needs to be subverted if praxis

[4] Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

is to become pragmatic. Webster, concluding his book *The Dalit Christians: A History*, says:

> God calls Christian Dalits to participate actively and even lead in the grass roots political struggle of all Dalits for the liberation God intends. In that struggle the church has proven to be weak, ineffective and often an instrument of caste oppression, even though it is predominantly Dalit in composition.[5]

Dalit theology needs to seriously consider the fact that Dalits constitute the vast majority of the Indian Church and, in contrast to other theologians,[6] make that fact foundational in arguing that the praxis of the Indian Church invariably entails a discussion on the agency of the Dalits in their liberation. There cannot be a dichotomy between the praxis of the church and the praxis of the Dalits. The condescending view of Dalits as mere 'recipients of charitable liberation' needs to be rethought. For change to happen the agency of Dalits must be theologically affirmed. It is here that one needs to question the extent to which Dalit theology has explored and provided theological resources to guide the engagement of Dalit Christians in their 'messianic task' of engaging in liberation.

The Question of the Ef.cacious God/Christ – The Problem of the 'Victim-ization' and 'Victor-ization' of God

The two predominant ways in which Dalit Theology has theologically imagined God and Christ can be categorized as the 'Victim-ization' and the 'Victor-ization' of God. These two imaginations of God are derived from two biblical paradigms, namely the Deuteronomic Creed found in Deuteronomy 26:5–12 with its roots in the Exodus paradigm of liberation and the suffering servant passages of Isaiah. While the first emphasizes the 'victor-ization of God', reinforcing the image of a God who delivers with a 'mighty hand' and 'an outstretched arm', the second emphasizes the 'victim-ization of God', invoking the image God in Christ becoming a Dalit in the fullest sense of the term. In spite of their popularity and widespread acceptance among Dalit theologians, we need to question whether these two images of God and Christ enhance the practical efficacy of Dalit theology. My argument is that they have not sponsored adequate impetus for transformation of the situation of the Dalits. This is primarily because Dalit theology's espousal and appropriation of these two biblical paradigms in its construction of the God and Christ of Dalit liberation is reflective of an epistemological clash between 'emic' (intrinsic/insider) and 'etic' (extrinsic/outsider) theoretical conceptualizations of the Dalit situation. The clash between *'emic'* and the '*etic*' theoretical conceptualizations (initially used in the theory of linguistics but now extended to social and cultural theory) merely

5 Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, p. 245.

6 Azariah, 'Doing Theology', p. 90.

denotes the tensions and differences between perspectives and conceptualizations which emerge 'inside' and 'outside' a community. This clash of perspectives is helpful in analysing Dalit theological imagination. Further clarification may be required on what I mean by the epistemological clash between *emic* (insider) and *etic* (outsider) theoretical conceptualizations. My use of the phrase 'etic-perspective' here refers to the intense Christianization of Dalit theology as well as Dalit theology's methodological derivation from and dependence upon Latin American Liberation Theology and Afro-American Black Theology, both of which have in my opinion estranged the theoretical framework of Dalit theology from the empirical realities of Dalit existence. My use of the phrase 'emic-perspective' here encompasses the existential realities of Dalits, their conceptions of God, the nature of their experiences and aspirations as well as the conceptual worldview of Dalit Christians, which they share with Dalits of other faiths. My contention is that the practical relevance of any biblical paradigm for Dalit theology can be determined only on the basis of its compatibility with and derivation from 'emic' perspectives. Examining the two dominant images of God articulated by Dalit theology from the perspective of this clash of epistemologies will help us to assess the (ir)relevance of these paradigms to facilitate Dalit liberation.

In appropriating the Deuteronomic creed, Dalit theology has adopted a biblical paradigm which is in continuity with the dominant Exodus paradigm that has been expounded by both Latin American Liberation theologians as well as Afro-American Black theologians. I am aware that Gutierrez uses the Exodus paradigm to emphasize that the Exodus event was the story of God who leads Israel from alienation to liberation.[7] Black liberation theologian james Cone utilizes the paradigm to emphasize that the God of the Old Testament is an active God who participates in the human story of liberation. However, we need to recognize that the Exodus paradigm is incompatible with the experiences of the Dalits at several points. Firstly, the image of the 'Victor-hood' of God which emerges from this paradigm is highly estranged in its conformity to Dalit experience. Taking his cue from the unlikely prospect of any radical or large-scale revolutionary structural change to the Dalit situation, Clarke makes a pertinent point about the inadequacy of the Exodus paradigm for the Dalit communities:

> (t)he notion of an all powerful God, who intervenes and completely reconfigures the world for the sake of the oppressed, does not find a dominant place in Dalit thinking and acting. This problematises the grandiose conceptions of God that result from postulating the Exodus paradigm as the heart of liberation theology. In the Indian context it seems that the 'mighty acts of God', which deliver God's chosen oppressed ones from the clutches of their oppressors, have either changed their aim or exhausted themselves ... on the other hand can it not be said that there has been a winding down of the mighty acts of God! There are

[7] Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1988) 2nd edn, p. 89.

> no miraculous signs clearly disrupting the hierarchical and unequal social order in India. There is no spectacular parting of the seas; there is no drowning of the violating and violent ones who exploit and destroy the poor and the Dalits. To put it as starkly as possible, the dictum of God's 'preferential option for the poor' has remained quite sterile in terms of practical, concrete improvements in the structures of the society for the good of the poor.[8]

Therefore, the choice of the Deuteronomic creed should be subject to critical scrutiny.

Secondly, the historical or political ramifications of using such a paradigm are highly questionable within the ambit of any liberation theological discourse. Expressing his distrust over using the paradigm, Robert Allen Warrior highlights the importance of considering the Canaanites as an important hermeneutical category when using the paradigm for liberation theology.[9] From his situatedness as a member of the *Osage* Nation of American Indians, Warrior discerns parallels between the Native Americans and the Canaanites. He points out that the 'obvious characters in the story for Native Americans to identify with are the Canaanites'.[10] They were the ones who already lived in the Promised Land. Warrior points out that 'it is the Canaanite side of the story that has been overlooked by those seeking to articulate theologies of liberation. Especially ignored are those parts of the story that describe Yahweh's command to mercilessly annihilate the indigenous population'.[11] In solidarity with other tribal people around the world, Warrior advocates reading the Exodus story with Canaanite eyes. There is a need to take note of the caution that the Exodus text is not value free and the 'narrative is disdainful of the rights of indigenous people'.[12] When Dalit theology, by adopting the Deuteronomic creed as its paradigm, draws analogies with this memory and affirms it as the story of their roots (Dalit) it is highly incompatible and inappropriate. The image of God which emerges from the Deuteronomic and Exodus paradigms is highly estranged from the Dalit images of God and Goddesses and is more in continuity with the images of the Hindu Brahminic 'weapon wielder' Gods, who, according to Kancha Illaiah, were propagators of violent wars, 'basically

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[8] Sathianathan Clarke, 'Dalits Overcoming Violation and Violence: a Contest Between Overpowering and Empowering Identities in Changing India', in *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, july 2002 (pp. 278–95), pp. 285, 286.

[9] Robert Allen Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995) (pp. 287–95).

[10] Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective', p. 289.

[11] Warrior, 'A Native American Perspective', p. 289.

[12] Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 281.

war heroes and mostly from wars conducted against Dalitbahujans'.[13] The lack of respect for life and use of violent means to establish control are identified by Illaiah as constituting the very epistemology of Brahminism.[14] Moreover, if one were to accept the contested theory of Aryan invasion and the related claims of the displacement of Dalits (the original inhabitants of the lands – 'the Adi-peoples') from their land, the Deuteronomic paradigm would serve more the interests of the Aryan invaders than the Dalits.

Thirdly, this biblical paradigm also has the dangerous potential to reinforce an antagonistic and polemic binarism of 'us' and 'them' which will undermine Dalit efforts to work alongside others in their quest for liberation. Further, such a paradigm also has the potential to advocate replication of the strategies of the dominant without breaking the cycle of domination. This is unhelpful in the context of caste-based discrimination where there is need for a more integrative model where both the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressors' are critically challenged to work in an integrative and dialogical manner for a non-exclusive and non-dehumanizing society. Thus we can conclude that the 'victorization' of God in Dalit theology lacks the potential to further Dalit liberation.

The other biblical paradigm adopted by Dalit theology in the articulation of a Dalit Christology is the paradigm of the suffering servant. Having grasped the gravity of the situation of the sub-human social existence of the Dalits, Dalit theology is a creatively and constructively envisaged theology which is premised on the epistemological paradigm of 'pathos' and 'suffering' of the Dalits. Its attempt as in most liberation theologies has been christological and based on the 'Dalit Christ'. Jesus becomes a Dalit in Dalit theology by virtue of his Dalitness, which is identified in terms of his 'pathos' experience as the suffering servant. This Pathos is recognized as the epistemic key to Dalit identity. In order to have an overview of this Christological explication it is worth quoting A.P. Nirmal's explication of the Dalit Christ:

> But the God whom Jesus Christ revealed and about whom the prophets of the Old Testament spoke is a Dalit God. He is a servant God – a God who serves. Services to others have always been the privilege of Dalit communities in India. The passages from Manu Dharma Sastra say that the Shudra was created by the self-existent (Svayambhu) to do servile work and that servitude is innate in him. Service is the Sva-dharma of the Shudra. Let us remember the fact that in Dalits we have peoples who are avarnas – those below the Shudras. Their servitude

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[13] Kancha Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 2005) (2nd edn), pp. 100–101. See also Kancha Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History', in Ghanshyam Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics: Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge*, Vol. 2 (New Delhi, London: Sage Publications and Thousand Oaks, London, 2001) (pp. 108–28), p. 114.

[14] See Illaiah, 'Dalitism vs Brahmanism', pp. 114–21.

> is even more pathetic than that of the Shudras. Against this background the amazing claim of a Christian Dalit Theology will be that the God of the Dalits, the self-existent, the Svayambhu does not create others to do servile work, but does servile work Himself. Servitude is innate in the God of the Dalits. Servitude is the sva-dharma of God; and since we the Indian Dalits are this God's people, service has been our lot and our privilege.[15]

Though this deliberate re-imagining of God as a servant God valorizes the Dalits and repositions their subjectivity as replicating Divine agency in the world, it also needs to be recognized that making inordinate hermeneutical purchase of this suffering-servant image could be counter-productive to practical liberation since there is the risk of romanticizing Dalit servanthood, which is both a product and continuing source of their oppression. At this point we also need to question the emancipatory potential of predominantly pathos-based christologies by critically pointing to their potential to reinforce masochistic acceptance of their present suffering. Liberation theologian George Casalis' reflection upon the christological image of j esus as the 'abject Lord' among the persecuted communities of South America makes this link with masochistic resignation clear. According to Casalis, 'when the faithful people pray before these images or venerate them, when their spirit is seared all through life by a pedagogy of submission and passivity, evidently it is their own destiny that they encounter here – and worship, and accept with masochistic resignation'.[16] The link between pathos-based christology and masochistic resignation cannot be glossed over. In such instances, it would be fair to argue that christology merely operates as a palliative, inuring the suffering people to the existing suffering (caused by systematized and structural oppression, institutionalized discrimination and religion-validated hierarchy), where the suffering j esus is inordinately romanticized. Recruiting God as an ally in suffering could therefore be counter-productive for Dalit liberation as suffering is not demonized but deified.

Analysing the suffering servant christology in the light of observations made by several Dalit political analysts as well as organic intellectuals makes us question whether pathos-based christologies seem to be reinforcing the very hegemonic aspects of the caste system which Dalit theology seeks to subvert.

For instance L.M. Shrikanth, the first commissioner (special officer) for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, who was constitutionally responsible for 'investigating all matters relating to the safeguards provided for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and the Scheduled Tribes (STs)', points to an important observation as to how the *servility* of the Dalit mindset has prevented them from rising beyond circumstances:

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[15] Nirmal, 'Towards', p. 224.

[16] George Casalis, 'j esus: Neither Abject Lord nor Heavenly Monarch', in j .M. Bonino (ed.), *Faces of Jesus: Latin American Christologies* (trans. by R.R. Barr) (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1977) (pp. 72–6), p. 73.

> By the force of habit the Harijan has lost his (sic) self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself but as a privilege or presence which he must protect. He has not much courage to seek another job in field or factory. He has become lazy in mind and body and callous to his own condition; and he will not educate his children.[17]

Shrikanth makes it clear that casteism has inculcated within the Dalits a passive acceptance of their socially inferior status. Commenting on the words of L.M. Shrikanth, Dalit theologian j ames Massey has this to say:

> The above words of Mr. Shrikanth reveal to us the inner nature of the Dalitness of the Dalits which they have reached by the ongoing oppression of caste and the social system which our society continues to maintain ….These also reveal to us the power of the caste system which can transform the person into such self-captivity or slavery from which it seems almost impossible to get liberation or freedom. The second most important truth about the Dalits Mr. Shrikanth has stated is that a Dalit has 'become lazy in mind and body, callous to his own conditions'. Of course being 'lazy in mind' and to feel 'callous' for his/her own condition are part of the inner nature of the Dalitness of the Dalits which really is responsible for all the problems of the Dalits, and which simply cannot be dealt with by mere passing of legislation or providing economic facilities.[18]

Nearly thirty years following the report of Shrikanth, another report, by the Backward Classes Commission, popularly known as the Mandal Commission, pointed out that the pervasive influence of the caste system lay in the psychological conditioning of the Dalits to the extreme extent of making them accept their socially inscribed inferiority and subservience as being ontological. According to the report, 'The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes into accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as part of the natural order of things'.[19] Even Ambedkar's own concern for the Dalits was for the 'need to get rid of the slavish mentality' drilled into them by the caste system. He points to their need to purify themselves from the 'inferiority complex that had gripped their minds and hearts for ages and weakened their spirit and dried up their motivation'.[20] In such a context the christology of identity affirmation proposed by Dalit theology does

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[17] L.M. Shrikant, Report of the Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for the Period ending 31st December, 1951, p. 1. Cited in Massey, 'Historical Roots', p. 41.

[18] Massey, 'Historical Roots', p. 42.

[19] Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Govt of India, First part, Vols I and II, 1980, p. 1. Cited in Massey, p. 45.

[20] Anthoniraj Thumma, *Dalit Liberation Theology: Ambedkarian Perspective* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), p. 83.

not confront this negative self-imaging of the Dalits but rather tacitly complies with the reinforcement of the 'slavish mentality' by affirming the servanthood of Jesus. Nirmal's thesis that God is a servant God is meant to enhance and affirm the humanity of the Dalits, that through their services as scavengers and slaves they have participated in this 'servant-God's-ministries'. God's servant humanity is reflected in the Dalit. This affirmation also has the possibility of enhancing Dalit self-understanding as bearing the image of God, but it could also imply passive acceptance of their religiously imposed inferiority and acquiescence to the prevailing status quo. According to Balasundaram, 'relating Jesus' servanthood to Dalit reality does not really help the Dalits'. This is because 'Jesus *offered* himself in servanthood, whereas the Dalits are already in servanthood, rather in servility'. In a context where the Dalits have 'no authentic self to offer to others', Balasundaram questions whether it is 'helpful to speak of servanthood, service and patient endurance of suffering?'. He says:

> We may accept suffering to the extent that suffering helps to overcome the suffering inflicted on us by others. Thus, in preaching, projecting and emphasising the servant image, we need to be careful. This means that we should not romanticize the concept of suffering, e.g. in the Sufferer and the Servant Jesus syndrome. Dalit theology should project an image of Jesus that has worth, dignity and freedom. Let us not preach a Jesus who has a crown and who has attained glory, nor a Jesus who suffered to the end and was finally put to death, but a Jesus who is the true man, a man of freedom, identity, worth, dignity and a man with a mission.[21]

So it is clear that the affirmation of the *servant* nature of God suffers the risky possibility of reinforcing the deeply inculcated sense of inferiority of the Dalits, rather than helping the Dalits to transcend this Dalitness. By the glorification of suffering and re-creation of Jesus in the image of the Dalits (I am not against this, but am concerned about the liberative potential of this image), Dalit theology contributes to the reinforcement of the status quo rather than challenging it.

We also need to question whether the Dalits themselves need such a God image. Arguing how even their choice of God reflects a strong sense of pragmatism, Arul Raja says that 'Dalits respond to only that brand of the divine which seeks to transform their vulnerabilities into empowerment'.[22] Therefore, if we analyse Dalit christology from the perspective of the clash of '*emic*' and '*etic*' epistemologies, we can easily demonstrate that Dalit christology has not taken into consideration the Dalits' own 'concept' and 'image' of God/dess or worked its christology in critical interaction with 'inside' conceptualizations. Rather, it has imposed models

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[21] Balasundaram, 'Dalit Struggle', p. 90.

[22] A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Living Streams Across the Parched Land: Some Tenets of Dalit Spirituality', in *CTC Bulletin* (pp. 1–8), p. 3. http://daga.dhs.org/cca/resources/ctc/ctc01-04/ctc0104d.htm.

from above which may not find acceptance among the Dalits. Further, it can also be argued that pathos-based christologies of identity affirmation based on the suffering servant image, through their inordinate romanticizing and glorification of suffering servanthood, are in a continuum with the hegemonic and oppressive *vedic* ideals which sought the strategic perpetuation of the slavish-mentality of the Dalits.

Another pertinent problem with both the 'victor-ization' and 'victim-ization' paradigms of God is that though both these paradigms offer scope for Dalit communities to imaginatively inhabit the world of the biblical text (albeit not necessarily in a liberative manner) they lack any space for imputation against the caste-system itself. Thus, the narrative identity that the Dalit communities can derive from these two paradigms is not necessarily an ethical identity, the difference between the two in this case being that while a narrative identity involves ascriptive-identification an ethical identity involves prescriptive-imputation, which involves making an unambiguous stand. Therefore, we can conclude that both the Exodus paradigm as well as the Suffering Servant paradigm of Dalit theology offer no scope for deriving liberative imperatives of ethical action and hence are counter-productive practically. An alternative framework for the Dalit imagination of God will be one which will be characterized by not *only* pathos, but will encompass elements of protest and resistance, which will place stress on questioning the perpetuation of the present status quo where Dalits are enslaved into accepting a slavish identity and which will be characterized by a radical discontinuity with the prevailing models.

The Question of Bipolar Ethical Imperative

Does Dalit theology offer an ethical model which will simultaneously challenge both the Dalits and their oppressors to act towards Dalit emancipation? For the complete emancipation of the Dalits in particular and for the ushering in of an egalitarian and just relationship between humans in a context of discrimination what is needed is a bipolar conversion of perspective. A change in attitude should happen between two poles – the oppressors and the oppressed. What is required to facilitate this bipolar conversion of perspective is a framework of ethical imperatives which impinges upon both participating poles of the issue. So, when we talk of conversion of perspective what is meant is that on the one hand the proposed theological paradigm should help the 'victims' to transcend their psychological enslavement and enable them to consciously engage themselves in the liberative task, while on the other hand Dalit theology should also critically challenge those who fall under the category of the 'oppressors' to recognize and realize their tacit compliance, either through their inaction or action, in perpetuating a hierarchical and unjust status quo. The oppressors need Dalit theology because they struggle to free themselves from the forces 'which keep them bonded to the

various forms of oppression that they perpetuate'.[23] Therefore, the oppressors, through their participation in oppression, are prevented from being full co-workers in the kingdom of God.[24] Thus, the role of Dalit theology would be to articulate an ethical paradigm which will be relevant to both Dalits and non-Dalits in order to enlist both Dalits and non-Dalits as partners in action leading to Dalit liberation. From our analysis of Dalit theology we can say that there has been a failure to recognize the paramount importance of engaging both Dalits and 'non-Dalits' as partners in liberation combined with the apparent passivity in articulating inclusive models of praxis. This polemic attitude has been manifest in the negativity of Dalit theologians (with the exception of Massey) towards theologies articulated by non-Dalit Brahminic theologians. We need a paradigm that will facilitate a bipolar conversion by way of which Dalit theology will assume pertinence to both the Dalits and non-Dalits. The proposal for a more inclusive theological paradigm increases the possibility for concrete and dialogical action for transformation.

The Question of Communicative Competence

At the moment it can be stated with conviction that Dalit theology has come to be more identifiable with theological institutions than with the Indian Church. Dalit theology has remained the work of those who are 'well positioned to reflect theologically upon Dalit struggles for basic human rights and equality of opportunity within both Indian society in general and the Christian Church in particular'.[25] But if Dalit theology has to make a change in the attitude of people within the Church it has to become accessible and meaningful to the people. Its meaning and relevance need to have a creative fidelity to the commitment to transform the situation of oppression of the Dalits. For theology to impact behaviour, two aspects of hermeneutics are important, namely communicative competence and heuristic compatibility.

For theology to impact the people of the Church, especially Dalits, a considerable proportion of whom are from non-literate backgrounds, the medium and forms of communication of theology are important factors to be considered. Webster recognizes preaching to be vital if the good news of Dalit theology is to have an impact on Dalit Christians.[26] As 'informal parish theologians', pastors help to shape the consciousness and piety of their parishioners through their implicit pastoral theologies used in various pastoral settings. But the crucial time when the

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[23] Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

[24] Dayanandan, 'Who Needs', p. 8.

[25] John C.B. Webster, 'Exploring the 'Pastoral Theology' Dimension of Dalit Liberation', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, June and September 2004 (pp. 49–74), p. 50.

[26] John C.B. Webster, 'A New Homiletic for Dalits?', in *BTF*, Vol. XXX, Nos 1 and 2, March and June 1998 (pp. 3–24), p. 3.

pastor-as-theologian can make a distinctively pastoral and theological contribution to the liberation of Dalit parishioners is during the Sunday worship.[27] Webster points out that one of the most serious problems of the homiletic of Dalit theology is that it is not receptor-oriented and therefore not very effective in communicating the gospel. Therefore, it is important and necessary to begin the quest for a new hermeneutic from within the frames of reference of the Dalits themselves as receptors of preached communication.[28] Webster points to the importance of narrative for Dalit communication on the basis of james Theophilus Appavoo's (also known as Parattai) research on Dalit folklore in Tamil Nadu. Appavoo brings out the importance of narrative rather than concepts for effective communication among Dalit communities. The narrative basis of Dalit communication is manifest in their proverbs, ideologies, songs, dramas and rituals.[29] The importance of narrative for Dalit theology has to be recognized, if Dalit theology has to make an impact on the Church.

Though many Dalit theologians have used the Bible to reflect on the situation of the Dalits, they have followed the Anglicist mode of interpretation which involves using western tools of biblical interpretation. Though there is a great value in this mode of hermeneutics in terms of attention being paid to the contexts at both ends of the hermeneutical circle (the implied original-reader context and the present Dalit context), one has to acknowledge that this mode of interpretation is more concerned with the appropriateness of the interpretive task as well as to ensure objectivity in interpretation and hence limited in terms of its applicability. There is also a focus on textuality, which is not a prominent part of the religious experience of most Dalits.

For the sake of communicative competence, Dalit hermeneutics has to be receptor-oriented and attention has to be paid to orality. There is need for a shift from concept-based theological paradigms to narrative paradigms, with a focus on liberation. The problem with concepts, according to Appavoo, is that concepts can be ambiguous, whereas narratives can rarely be ambiguous because they express ideas in terms of action. With regard to Dalit hermeneutics, there is a need to follow the Dalit tradition and translate biblical ideas into songs and drama to enhance its communication potential.[30] Another advantage of narrative biblical paradigms is that they are compatible with the other methodologies of reading recognized by theologians as being relevant for Dalit hermeneutics, like role-playing and storytelling.[31] Focusing on Dalit women, Monica Melanchton pays specific attention to their embodiment and sees a Dalit feminist/womanist methodology of

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27 Webster, 'Exploring', p. 51.

28 Webster, 'A New', pp. 9–10.

29 james Theophilus Appavoo, *Folklore for Change*, cited in Webster, 'A New', p. 11.

30 james Theophilus Appavoo, 'Dalit Way of Theological Expression', in Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (pp. 283–9), pp. 286, 287.

31 See Monica jyotsna Melanchthon, 'Dalits, Bible and Method', in *SBL Forum*, http://www.sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=459 (pp. 1–8), p. 6.

reading a text as basically being of a performative nature. She understands Dalit women to be 'interlocutors between their experience of dehumanization and the world of the biblical text'.[32] When talking about Dalit hermeneutics or homiletics it is important to take into consideration the use of biblical passages which are compatible with the hermeneutical methodology of the Dalits themselves. It has been acknowledged that there is a performative trait in the religious experience of subalterns in general.[33] There is a strong collective component to this oral tradition because it is through participation in the collective, communitarian performance that transmission takes place.[34] Because of the earthliness of the hermeneutics and the oral and performative aspects of Dalits, one cannot engage in a process of decoding and interpretation. Rather, what is present is itself an interpretation of life. One should understand that one can only participate in subaltern hermeneutics and cannot simply access them through cognitive tools. 'Hermeneutics shifts from cognitive realm as interpretation and meaning to an interpreted experience on the world and society.'[35] Therefore if Dalit theology has to impact the life and behaviour of the Dalits, Dalit theology should focus on enabling a performative and embodied hermeneutics to take place. This entails choosing biblical narratives that correspond to the life situation of the Dalits as the biblical paradigms for Dalit theology. The texts should offer scope for Dalits to see their own situation and struggles in the text and allow the Dalits to tell corresponding stories from their own life, which will help them to understand the biblical narrative as well as their own lives in a new way. Further, because praxis is the aim, the texts should offer models of praxis which enable healing as well as practical engagement in the task of liberation to take place.

Praxis can become more effective if attention is paid to the heuristic compatibility of biblical ethics and the Dalit worldview. Drawing out the framework for a pertinent Dalit hermeneutics, A. Maria Arul Raja proposes that 'the religiosity latent in Dalit culture should be activated and brought into dialogue with biblical religiosity'.[36] The meaning for Dalit liberation is produced as the result of a dialectic conversation between the openness (open-minded pre-understanding) of the Dalit Christian and the openness (semantic autonomy) of the Bible.[37] Sugirtharajah points out that the valency of the Bible for the Dalits depends upon 'its ability to espouse Dalit causes and more pertinently, its potentiality to resonate with the

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[32] Monica jyotsna Melanchthon, 'Dalit Readers of the Word: The Quest for Hermeneutics and Method', in Massey and Prabhakar (eds), *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics* (pp. 45–64), p. 61.

[33] Felix Wilfred, 'Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics Beyond Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretation of Religious Tradition', in *Jeevadhara*, Vol. XXVI, No. 151, 1996 (pp. 45–63), p. 60.

[34] Wilfred, 'Towards', p. 60.

[35] Wilfred, 'Towards', p. 62.

[36] Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, pp. 233–6.

[37] Arul Raja, 'Towards a Dalit Reading of the Bible', p. 31.

Dalit mode of thinking'.[38] For the impetus for praxis to emerge from within the Dalits there is need for paradigms which enable the liberative potential of the Bible to be brought into critical interaction with the resistive potential inherent in their religiosity. Therefore, it is important that the choice of biblical texts to be used in Dalit contexts should to a considerable extent mirror the Dalit situation. Thus, for Dalit theology to become more effective, it is important to recognize the possibilities of narrative theology and use biblical resources which facilitate narrative and embodied theology to take place, which can also make effective praxis possible.

At the end of this chapter we can conclude that there are certain issues in the theological articulation of Dalit theology which have the potential to curtail the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. Therefore, though the intended goals of Dalit theology are intensely practical (and hence ethical), its theological content deters effective engagement in social transformation. In order to make Dalit theology more praxis-oriented there is a need to revise and reconstruct Dalit theology along the lines of the criticisms which have emerged. Only then can Dalit theology be able to reinvent itself as a more efficacious theology of liberation.

[38] Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 235.

Chapter 3
The Way Forward

How do we address the lacunae between Dalit theology and the social practice of the Indian Church? In the light of our analysis of Dalit theology it is now clear that to enhance the practical efficacy of Dalit theology we need a theological paradigm which will primarily offer a Christian ethical framework to critique caste-based discrimination and enable the Indian Church, which is predominantly Dalit, to participate effectively in the task of Dalit liberation. This theological paradigm also must encompass the other criticisms of Dalit theology which emerged in the previous chapter. In such a context it needs to be said that this theological paradigm will necessarily have to be a biblical paradigm. That is because the Bible happens to be either directly or indirectly the primary Christian resource for Dalits and exercises significant influence on the social practice of the Dalit communities. It would be relevant to delve into the relationship between Dalits and the Bible at this point.

The Bible and Dalits

It needs to be acknowledged that Dalit theologians have been consistent in their acknowledgement of the liberative role of the Bible in the liberation struggles of the Dalits. Whether as a 'dynamic source of energy' for their 'corporate and individual attempts at liberation',[1] or as 'the basic faith document that inspires and instills hope and resilience and acts as a shield and a sword in their existential faith journey',[2] the Bible is pivotal especially for the Christian Dalit struggle for justice and the reclamation of their dignity and identity. However, it needs to be recognized that the relationship between the Bible and the Christian Dalit communities in India is multi-faceted, complex and polyvalent. The notion that 'the Bible in its fixed, unitary and written form operates as scripture for the Dalit communities' is estranged from the actual faith experiences of the Dalit communities where the Bible functions in ways in which it both derives from and is dependent on the written text of the Bible on the one hand, while being

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[1] K. j esurathnam, 'Towards a Dalit Liberative re-reading of the Psalms of Lament', in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 1, j une 2002 (pp. 1–34), p. 2.

[2] I. j ohn Mohan Razu, 'The Bible, A Shield and A Sword: From a Perspective of the Subalterns', in Israel Selvanayagam (ed.), *Light on Our Dusty Path: Essays for a Bible Lover* (Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute and Board of Theological Education Senate of Serampore College, SATHRI/ BTESSC, 2008), (pp. 58–77), p. 58.

free from it on the other.[3] Thus, one can speak of both 'text-based' and 'non-text-based' functions of the Bible in Dalit liberation. In such a context, the manner in which the Christian Dalit communities relate to the Bible can be better described in terms of '*appropriation*' of the Bible than as '*interpretation*' of the biblical text, as it transcends the conventions of textual interpretation. We can talk of 'trans-textual' and 'sensory' dimensions to the emancipatory appropriation of the Bible by ordinary Christian Dalit communities. Given the rampant illiteracy among Dalit communities and their worldview of venerating objects as repositories of divine power, Dalits endorse the power of the Bible to touch and act in a magical way, often placing it on people's heads and shoulders during prayers for healing and deliverance.[4] This magical notion of the Bible testifies to Dalit reception of the performative dimension of the Bible which is crucial to their understanding of the Bible as being emancipatory.

The Bible is also a signifier of a new and empowering identity for Dalits, as they now have access to 'some' holy scripture which was denied to them earlier under the Hindu caste system. The Dalits were denied access to the Hindu *Vedas* and were punished with molten lead being poured into their ears for even inadvertently listening to the *Vedas*. Dalit historian-theologian james Taneti is helpful in delineating how Dalits (especially Telugu Dalit women) constructively appropriated the dynamics of the signification which access to the Bible offered for them, in course of their search 'for an alternative religion of the book as a weapon to challenge the ever-absorbing and aggressive Hinduism'. According to Taneti:

> Dalits, who shared oral traditions, would have seen the act of reading and writing as an empowering experience as well as a challenge to Hinduism, which also was a text-based culture. Dalits considered literacy as a political weapon with which they could challenge their Hindu oppressors .... According to Hinduism, the very recital of the religious scriptures and their sounds is sacred and emancipating to one's soul. It was the prerogative of the Brahmins, the 'highest' caste in the Hindu hierarchy. In this context, mastering these texts and their sounds is a power claim. Through mastering the sacred texts (the Bible in this case), Telugu women were attempting to create parallel power structures in which they could assert their power. It is evident in the response the women's seminary in Tuni received

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[3] Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 30.

[4] Sathianathan Clarke, 'Viewing the Bible Through the Eyes and Ears of Subalterns in India', Paper presented at the Ecumenical Enablers' Programme organized by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) on 'The Quest for New Hermeneutics in Asia' in Bangkok, Thailand, from 28 March to 2 April 2001. Also published in *Biblical Interpretation*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2002 (pp. 251–7).

> and in the way Telugu women, especially Dalit women, mastered (memorized) the texts, and rendered them in story forms to their Hindu counterparts.[5]

Thus, for these communities, which were not only systematically denied access to traditional scriptures, but were also discriminated on the basis of the sanctification and justification offered by the same scriptures, this access to the Bible was subversive as it had the potential 'to replace the world view of the Hindu scriptures and displace the Hindu Vedas'.[6] The Bible 'not only filled a void but also supplied the Dalits with a framework for knowledge that they did not have to begin with and which they desired'.[7]

However, Dalit appropriation of the Bible is not solely trans-textual. There are several ways in which Dalit communities appropriate the text of the Bible in their struggle for liberation. One good example is their interpretation of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus found in John chapter 3:1–21, where Dalits make hermeneutical purchase of the detail that Nicodemus came to Jesus *by night* to argue that Jesus was a kind of Dalit because people who mattered in society, like Nicodemus, are reluctant to be associated with Jesus, in public in the same way that respectable people would not openly approach the Dalits.[8] In a similar vein, Jose D. Maliekal mentions how Ebenezer, a village elder belonging to the *Madiga* community (a Dalit community associated with dead flesh and leather), boasted 'that *St. Thomas the Apostle was a Madiga* because he dared to place his fingers into the wounded flesh of Jesus', in what is an obvious reference to Jesus' post-resurrection conversation with Thomas found in John 20:26–9.[9] Yet it needs to be noted that nowhere in the biblical narrative is it recorded that Thomas actually touched the wounds of Jesus. Rather, Jesus only invites Thomas to put his fingers into his wounds according to the biblical text.[10] Maliekal identifies this interpretation as being 'the software-chip of a potential Madiga identity theology', whereby Ebenezer was 'trying to assert his pride in his traditional trade, the identity-marker of his caste, by tracing an aetiology for it and taking off the stigma attached to it'.[11] The strength of the textual appropriation of the Bible by the Dalits lies in such refiguring of important biblical characters in interaction with the experiences of the Dalits so as to reconfigure the communal identity of the

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5 James Taneti, 'Encounter between Protestant and Telugu Women's Paradigms of Scripture', Paper presented at 'Comparative Theology: Engaging Particularities Conference', Boston College, 2007, pp. 8, 9.

6 Melanchton, 'Dalits Bible and Method'.

7 Melanchton, 'Dalits Bible and Method'.

8 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 30.

9 Jose D. Maliekal, 'Identity-consciousness of the Christian Madigas Story of a People in Emergence', in *Jeevadhara: A Journal of Christian Interpretation*, Vol. XXXI, No. 181, Jan. 2001 (pp. 25–36), p. 25.

10 Clarke, 'Viewing the Bible'.

11 Maliekal, 'Identity-consciousness', p. 25.

Dalit communities in an affirmative and identity-enhancing manner. However, this is not the only manner in which Dalits appropriate the biblical 'text'. Referring to the Dalit understanding of the 'Bible as "Canon" for Recovering Universal Human Values and "Canon" for Subverting Local Forms of Subjugation and Alienation', Clarke points to how Dalits seek to make '(a)ll human beings' 'obedient to the dictates of the Biblical message' by the utilization of 'the truths that are recovered from the Bible' in order 'to effect changes in the depraved power relations that exist in contravention of the biblical vision'.[12] Therefore it is clear that the Dalits recognize the potential of the Bible to facilitate liberation. Therefore, it is justified to say that there is a distinct practical dimension to Dalit biblical interpretation. Dalits' ideas about the appropriation of the Bible are thoroughly functional and seek transformation of the Dalit situation. This implies that biblical paradigms are central and assume importance in any discussion on Dalit liberation.

The Question of Biblical Resources

In the light of our earlier discussion on the theological content of Dalit theology, a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology should be one which will enable the Indian Church to derive the predicates of the obligatory which constitute a Christian ethical response to caste based discrimination. This paradigm should also offer space for the Christian Dalit communities to derive an agential self-identity or, to put it in Foucault's terms, develop an appropriate 'technology of the self' whereby Dalits can valorize their identity as agents. Having seen how the discrimination against Dalits can be understood within the theoretical framework of purity and pollution, we can hypothetically postulate that a pertinent biblical paradigm to critique discrimination based on purity and pollution should necessarily encompass segregation and discrimination based on similar lines in the biblical narrative. It is in this context that I propose to interrogate the possibility and pertinence of considering the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm which can further the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. The effort in this chapter will be to discuss arguments for the use of the synoptic healing stories as biblical resources to improve the effectiveness of the praxis of Dalit theology.

Theological Importance of the Stories of Jesus' Healings

The importance of the healing stories in the synoptic gospels cannot be discounted because over one fifth of the literary units of the synoptic gospels contain either descriptions or allusions to the healings and exorcisms of j esus and his disciples.[13]

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[12] Clarke, 'Viewing the Bible'.

[13] Howard Clark Kee, *Medicine, Miracle and Magic in New Testament Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 1.

There are several theological and ethical signposts which validate the proposal to consider the synoptic healing stories as a valid biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. Grappling with the perplexity surrounding the reasons for j esus' miracles, Graham Stanton argues that paying close attention to the individuals and circumstances involved in the healing stories can help throw light onto the purported intention of j esus. [14] According to Stanton:

> j esus healed people with many kinds of disability. The lepers healed by j esus may have had some kind of skin disease, i.e. not what we know as Hansen's disease; but in the eyes of many, touching a leper was a violation of ritual regulations (Mark 1.40–45 parr.; Luke 17.11–19; Lev 13.45–6; j osephus, Ag. Ap. 1.279–86). As Kee (1986: 78–9) has emphasized, j esus healed persons who were considered by some of his contemporaries to be 'off-limits' by the standards of j ewish piety, by reason of their race (Mark 7.24–30), their place of residence (Mark 5.1–20) in a tomb in pagan territory, or their ritual impurity (5.25–34, a woman with menstrual flow). Although a full discussion is not possible here, many of the healings and exorcisms of j esus were an indication of his full acceptance of those who were socially and religiously marginalized.[15]

The acceptance of those who were identified as marginalized is one important factor on the basis of which we can consider the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology.

Discounting the valency of the umbrella metaphor of 'j esus the teacher' under which the quest for the historical j esus has been predominantly undertaken, Stevan L. Davies in his *Jesus the Healer* argues that studies which have focused on the single ruling metaphor of j esus as the teacher only indicate and accentuate the flawed nature of scholarly attempts to produce a comprehensive and credible portrait of j esus' teachings as they have only been too diverse and contradictory.[16] According to him, the image of j esus as teacher is highly estranged in its conformity with evidence. Davies castigates the inclination of scholars towards unbridled relativism which has resulted in a frivolous misrepresentation of j esus in camouflages congenial to authorial intent.[17] Against this metaphor of 'j esus

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[14] Graham Stanton, 'Message and Miracles', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 66.

[15] Stanton, 'Message', p. 68.

[16] Stevan L. Davies, *Jesus the Healer* (London: SCM Press, 1995), pp. 14ff.

[17] Here Davies follows the arguments of Schweitzer who, upon discovering that scholars had the tendency to present a j esus who was congenial to them and who taught what they themselves felt should be taught, devastatingly criticized such attempts to interpret the teachings and career of the historical j esus. According to Davies, 'Every scholar engaged in j esus research is by profession a teacher and so every construction of j esus the Teacher is formulated by a teacher. These teachers, professors by trade, should wonder if there is not a bit of a j esus-Like-Us in their constructions', Davies, *Jesus*, p. 10.

the Teacher', Davies proposes a paradigmatic shift to 'jesus the Healer' which he feels is more relevant and apt:

> The ruling metaphor, or paradigm, that does work, that does reveal an historical jesus who did pretty much what the New Testament says he did, and who is not a social type never before or since heard of in the world (e.g., a peasant jewish Cynic) is the metaphor of jesus the Healer. Start with the question 'how did he heal' rather than the question 'what did he teach' and many things become clear.[18]

However, Davies doesn't take into appropriate consideration the theological underpinnings of the healing stories. Eric Lott points out how Davies' lack of interest in theological meanings of the healing leads him to 'ignore substantial parts of the healing acts'. Lott observes that the subjection of the healing stories to Davies' view of jesus as a spirit-possessed ecstatic, who, like other shaman figures effected healing by being taken over by another persona and drew others into sharing his own 'dissociative religious trance', is unnecessarily limiting.[19] Lott makes clear the virtual impossibility of arriving upon an authentic picture of jesus or of his liberating work, unless his healing acts are crucial to this picture. Exclaiming his perplexity that 'healing' hasn't figured as an interpretative category, as a hermeneutical key, Lott says that a psycho-anthropological way of reading these stories could prove fruitful in trying to work out a more authentic Dalit Theology and Tribal theology.[20] Lott points out the possibility of healing being a fruitful way 'of focusing more sharply on issues at the centre of liberationist concern'. According to him:

> These stories of jesus' healing acts can be powerful paradigms of the wholeness we seek for our world, the new world of God's justice we must surely struggle for, whether as frontline activists, or as back stage supporters with our prayers, our preaching, our thinking. jesus the Healer is also jesus the just, the one whose every act expressed his concern for the promised new world in which all god's children would find acceptance and wholeness, justice and peace. The stories of his healing acts, therefore, are pregnant with wider meaning and point us inexorably to the wider web of life of which we are part.[21]

Considering the fact that Lott, a theologian of British origin, spent thirty years in India as a theological teacher and as a pastor to predominantly Dalit congregations, his point that the healing stories can help in working out a more authentic Dalit theology is worth serious consideration. On the basis of the above-

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18 Davies, *Jesus*, p. 15. Emphasis in original.

19 Eric j. Lott, *Healing Wings: Acts of Jesus for Human Wholeness* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1998), p. 1.

20 Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 2.

21 Lott, *Healing Wings*, pp. 4–5.

mentioned points, one can embark on a quest to justify further the rationale for using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical resource for Dalit theology. I intend to focus my arguments for using the synoptic healing stories as the biblical basis for Dalit theology under three broad topics, namely: convergent hermeneutical matrices, Christic praxis and constructive alternative for Dalit theology.

Healing Stories and the Possibility of Convergent Matrices

Notions of purity and pollution furnish substantial common ground between the twenty-first century Indian caste context and the context of the synoptic healing stories, which is suggestive of heuristic compatibility. As we seek to see whether notions of purity and impurity were integral to illness, it is important to understand the taxonomy of illnesses which prevailed during j esus' time. Taxonomy refers to the 'identification, classification, clustering of illnesses into culturally meaningful categories'.[22] Pilch identifies three different illness taxonomies from biblical data found in Luke-Acts, which, because of their broad nature, can be extended to encompass the healings and exorcisms of j esus mentioned in the other synoptic gospels too. The three taxonomies which Pilch constructs are:[23]

A taxonomy built on spirit involvement Here the basic conception is about the involvement of a 'spirit' in human illnesses. The stories of j esus' exorcisms and those involving possession fall under this category.

A taxonomy built on symbolic body zones affected Under this taxonomy, one can cluster reports under which specific parts of the body or their distinct activities are mentioned. Pilch refers to Malina, who points to three mutually interpenetrating yet distinguishable symbolic zones, namely, the zone of emotion-fused thought (heart-eyes), the zone of self-expressive speech (mouth-ears), the zone of purposeful action (hands-feet).[24] Pilch also places conception, menstrual irregularity, leprosy and death in the hands-feet zone because people affected by these cannot engage themselves in purposeful activity. Reflecting upon the story of healing of Peter's mother-in-law from a demon called 'Fever', Pilch also suggests that the spirit-related taxonomy and the symbolic body-zone taxonomy could be collapsed into one.[25]

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[22] j ohn j . Pilch, 'Sickness and Healing in Luke-Acts', in j erome H. Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke–Acts* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991) (pp. 181–209), p. 200.

[23] See Pilch, 'Sickness', pp. 200 ff.

[24] See Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: j ohn Knox, 1981), pp. 61–2 for a comprehensive list of vocabulary reflecting each symbolic zone.

[25] Pilch, 'Sickness', p. 206.

A taxonomy based on purity and impurity Along with Neyrey and Malina, Pilch also constructs a taxonomy of illness based on degrees of purity and impurity which he considers to be particularly important. He states that a taxonomy of illness based on impurity could be 'another all-encompassing category for explaining the illnesses listed in the Gospels'. According to Malina, 'the most comprehensive taxonomy is the one based on different kinds of impurity', which could 'easily subsume the other taxonomies'.[26] Skin problems 'called leprosy' affect bodily boundaries thus symbolizing threats to purity or wholeness. People who suffered such conditions thus posed threats to the purity and wholeness of the whole community because their presence within the community violate the community's boundaries, rendering the communities unclean, impure and lacking in wholeness and holiness (Leviticus 13–14). In the same way, women and men with 'uncontrolled and uncontrollable bodily effluvia' were not only impure because of their lack of wholeness, but polluting as well. Those afflicted in one or other symbolic bodily zones, as well as those possessed or affected by a malevolent spirit, lacked symbolic bodily integrity, which further pointed to deficient purity, wholeness and holiness, which makes it easy to co-opt all the taxonomies under the taxonomy of purity and impurity.[27] This categorical construction of taxonomies points out that issues of purity and pollution were integral to illness. We can now say that, in the light of these findings it can be said that notions of purity and pollution constitute the overarching paradigm and common intersecting arena of the socio-cultural matrices of 21st-century Indian society and those of 1st-century judaism. This makes cross-cultural hermeneutic application a plausible enterprise.

Notions of purity and pollution in the Mosaic Law/Levitical Codes There are also evidences in the Mosaic Law/Levitical Codes which relate sickness to purity and pollution. According to the Mosaic Law/Levitical codes, purity laws relating specifically to physical states can be divided into two categories, namely purity laws on physical states in relation to the sanctuary and purity laws on physical states in relation to daily life.

Support can be drawn from the book of Leviticus to argue that holiness meant wholeness in judaic context, especially in relation to the sanctuary and holy of holies. One has to be cognizant of the fact that this dictum extended beyond anthropology. For example, the Levitical stipulations in Leviticus 22:21–2 regarding animals meant for sacrifice make it clear that the sacrificial animals had to be without blemish:

> v.21) when anyone offers a sacrifice of well beings to the lord, in fulfilment of a vow or as a free will offering, from the herd or from the flock, to be acceptable it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. v.22) Anything blind, or injured,

26 Pilch, 'Sickness', pp. 206, 207.

27 Pilch, 'Sickness', p. 207.

> or maimed or having a discharge or any itch or scabs – these you shall not offer to the lord or put any of them on the altar as offerings by fire to the Lord.

Support for the dictum 'wholeness as holiness' can also be drawn from the stipulations regarding priests mentioned in Leviticus 21:6–23:

> v.16) The Lord spoke to Moses saying
> v.17) speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God.
> v.18) For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long,
> v.19) or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand,
> v.20) or a hunch back, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.
> v.21) no descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish he shall not come near to offer the food of his God.
> v.22) He may eat of the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy.
> v.23) But he shall not come near the curtains or approach the Altar because he has a blemish; that he may not profane my sanctuaries….

It may seem right to conclude at this point that only in the context of the sanctuary were notions of purity and pollution based on physical wholeness the basis of marginalization. This was why animals and officiants with defective and excessive physical traits (scabs, hunch backs) were considered as posing the threat of profaning the sanctuary and thus marginalized from the temple. Then to what extent can we speak of the purity code as being active and instrumental in marginalizing the masses? To tackle this question it would be appropriate to see how purity laws regarding physical states governed day-to-day life.

There were rules to govern day-to-day impurity. We will be looking initially at the rules of contagion applicable to leprosy, menstruation and corpse defilement for which there is ample and direct reference in the Hebrew Bible. Leviticus chapter 13 deals exhaustively with leprosy, its identification, accompanying rules of contagion and the procedures involved in its cleansing. Leviticus 13:45–6 puts the rules of contagion concerning people identified as having leprosy as follows:

> v.45) The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be dishevelled, and he shall cover his upper lips and cry out, 'unclean, unclean'.
> v.46) He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.

Certain important aspects of the disease which emerge from Leviticus chapter 13 are that it is clearly a priestly prerogative to examine a leprous person and

pronounce him/her unclean and clean, and leprosy doesn't concern persons alone: leprosy can even affect houses (14:34 ff) and clothing (13:47).

Leviticus 15 gives us information about the rules of contagion governing bodily discharges.

> v.25) if a woman has a discharge of blood for many days, not at the time of her impurity, or if she has a discharge beyond the time of her impurity, all the days of the discharge she shall continue in uncleanness; as in the days of her impurity, she shall be unclean.

Regarding what it means to be unclean during her impurity, verses 19–24 make it clear that any person who touches her and everything that she lies on and sits upon shall be unclean (v.20), and whoever comes into contact with these things shall be unclean until the evening (vs.22–3). Anyone who lies with her will be unclean seven days and every bed on which this person lies.

There are also strict rules about becoming impure through corpse contact in Numbers 19:10–14:

> v.10.b) This shall be a perpetual statute for the Israelites and for the alien residing among them.
> v.11) Those who touch the dead body of any human being shall be unclean seven days.
> v.12) They shall purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day and so be clean; but if they don't purify themselves on the third day and on the seventh day, they will not become clean.
> v.13) All who touch a corpse, the body of a human being who has died, and don't purify themselves, defile the tabernacle of the Lord; such persons shall be cut off from Israel. Since water for cleansing was not dashed on them, they remain unclean; their uncleanness is still on them.
> v.14) This is the Law when someone dies in a tent everyone who comes into the tent and everyone who is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.

Numbers 5:1–3 captures the fear of contagion which accompanied such notions of purity and pollution, that made it imperative for people 'polluted' by bodily discharge, leprosy and corpse-defilement to be marginalized from the camp as follows:

> v.1) The Lord spoke to Moses saying,
> v.2) 'Command the Israelites to put out of the camp everyone who is leprous or has a discharge, and every one who is unclean through contact with a corpse,
> v.3) you shall put out both male and female, putting them outside camp; they must not defile their camp, where I dwell among them'.

Though leprosy, menstruation and corpse-defilement occur outside the realm of the sanctuary, any impurity contacted through these poses a threat to the sanctuary. The adjunction found in Leviticus 15:31 makes the point clear – '*Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, so that they do not die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst*'.

We can conclude that maintenance of purity through the exclusion of the potentially 'defiling' was understood to be the requirement to ensure the holiness of the camp. Any aberration of this holiness affected the sanctuary – the dwelling place of God which was part of the camp. Hence people in certain physical states understood to be polluted had to be separated from mainstream society because their presence was perceived as a threat to the integrity of the whole symbolic order, especially the temple, which was the microcosm of the holiness pertaining to Israel. The consequence of this was the marginalization of lepers, menstruating woman and those defiled by corpse-touch, who were considered the manifestation of impurity.

Notions of purity and pollution and hierarchy: evidence from socio-critical and anthropological sources On the basis of the above-mentioned evidence from the Levitic and Mosaic codes one can say almost that there is no indication of a hierarchy in terms of purity and pollution. But j erome H. Neyrey's reconstruction of j ewish purity maps makes it clear how a hierarchy regarding notions of pure and polluted prevailed with regard to people, places and things. Neyrey's mapping of the symbolic universe of first century j udaism helps us to place notions of purity and pollution as the ideology used to impose structure and order on the j ewish world of j esus. Following Mary Douglas' principle of understanding 'purity' as a process of ordering a socio-cultural system, and 'pollution' as whatever violates that ordering, he understands purity in two senses – as the general, abstract system of ordering and classifying, and as the specific purity rules on the basis of which persons, objects, places etc are labelled pure or polluted in a given social group.[28] For Neyrey the basic model to study the symbolic universe of first century j udaism is the model of purity and pollution. In first century j udaism 'pure' refers to all that accords with the core value and its structural expression and 'polluted' refers to anything which contravenes the core value in any way.[29] Neyrey, through the mapping of places, people, times, body, and uncleanness, points out how these maps make clear the valuational structuring and definition of places, people, times and parts of the body. He brings in sufficient evidence from rabbinic literature to make his point that notions of purity and pollution were inextricably related to

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28 See j erome H. Neyrey, 'The Idea of Purity in Mark's Gospel', in *Semeia*, Vol. 35, 1986 (pp. 91–127).

29 j erome H. Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts: "They Turn the World Upside Down"', in Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke–Acts* (pp. 271–304), pp. 274–5.

hierarchy and discrimination at the empirical level in the j udaism of j esus' time.[30] His reconstruction of purity maps of places, persons, things and time will give us a broad overview of the idea of purity which prevailed during the j udaism of j esus' time and how it is connected to hierarchy.

On the basis of the m.Kelim 1.6–9, Neyrey constructs a map of places according to ten degrees of holiness.[31]

> The Land of Israel is holier than all other land.
>
> The Walled Cities (of the land of Israel) are still more holy in that they must send forth lepers from their midst.
>
> Within the Walls (of j erusalem) is still more holy, for here they may only eat the Lesser Holy things and the Second Tithe.
>
> The Temple Mount is still more holy, for no man or woman who has flux, no menstruant, and no woman after child birth may enter therein.
>
> The Rampart is still more holy, for no gentiles and none that have contacted uncleanness from a corpse may enter therein.
>
> The Court of Women is still more holy for none that had immersed himself the same day because of uncleanness may enter therein.
>
> The Court of the Israelites is still more holy…
>
> The Court of the Priests is still more holy…
>
> Between the Porch and the Altar is still more holy for none that has a blemish or whose hair is unloosed may enter there
>
> The sanctuary is still more holy… the Holy of Holies is still more holy.[32]

On the basis of this map one can discern that the holiness of any place corresponds to its proximity to the temple. Hence, the Holy of Holies, being the

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30 I am aware that scholarly debate has brought out the tensions about accepting rabbinic j udaism per se as the j udaism which governed social life during j esus' time. But one has to recognize the interconnection between the Pharisees and rabbinic j udaism which has been satisfactorily established. This is a point of contention from many scholars.

31 Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke–Acts', pp. 278–9.

32 Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), pp. 606 ff and Neyrey, 'The Idea'.

centre of the temple, has a superior degree of holiness, whereas gentile territory is entirely off the map since it is out of Israel and so not holy.[33]

Neyrey also brings out a map of persons given by the t.Megillah 2.7. In a descending order of holiness/purity the following order prevails: [34]

Priests
Levites
Israelites
Converts
Slaves
Disqualified Priests (illegitimate children of priests)
Netins (Temple Slaves)
Mamzers (bastards)
Eunuchs
Those with damaged testicles
Those without a penis

Neyrey goes on to add that one should bear in mind the place of the physically impaired as well as the general exclusion of women on this list. According to this map, two things become clear about holiness, that holiness means wholeness and that one's ranking invariably corresponds to one's standing vis-à-vis the Temple. Therefore, people with damaged bodies are ranked last; their lack of wholeness denoting deficit holiness, and people with damaged family lines are ranked second to last. People defective either in body or in family lines are on the perimeter of the temple, whereas the priests and Levites stand closer to the temple.

Considering the fact that even observant j ews may pass through stages of purity and pollution, the m.Kelim 1.5 furnishes a map of impurities which would help the Israelites to know one's place in the purity system at all times. It lists the contaminant, the period of contamination and the remedy for the contamination. Based on the m.Kelim 1.5, Neyrey draws a map of impurities which lists in a hierarchical manner the sources of contamination:

There are things which convey uncleanness by contact (e.g. a dead creeping thing, male semen)…
They are exceeded by carrion…
They are exceeded by him that has connection with a menstruant
They are exceeded by the issue of him that has a flux, by his spittle, his semen and his urine…
They are exceeded by (the uncleanness of) what is ridden upon (by him that has a flux)…

[33] Neyrey, 'The Idea', p. 95.
[34] Neyrey, 'The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts', p. 279.

> (The Uncleanness of) that is ridden upon (by him that has a flux) is exceeded by what he lies upon…
> (the uncleanness of) what he lies upon is exceeded by the uncleanness of him that has a flux …
>
> (m.Kelim 1.3)[35]

Neyrey goes on to add that the uncleanness of a man is exceeded by the uncleanness of a woman, whose uncleanness is exceeded by that of a leper, then by that of a corpse (m.Kelim 1.4).

On the basis of this analysis of the notions of purity and pollution in the jewish context, one can discern a few intersecting matrices which will facilitate the hermeneutical task of appropriating the synoptic healing stories as biblical paradigms for the Indian caste context:

i) Notions of purity and pollution function as the basis of social and physical segregation in both the contexts. Allusions to notions of purity and pollution are central to the segregation of Dalit communities in Indian villages. Dalits are forced to live in *cheries* and *Dalitwadas* and are thus separated from the caste-communities who live in the main village. The discrimination of the Dalit communities is on the basis of notions of the pure and impure. Similarly in this chapter we have seen that purity concerns, operating through the idiom of contagion are the foundations on the basis of which lepers, menstruating women and those defiled through corpse-defilement are segregated from the rest of the camp.

ii) The m.Kelim and t.Megillah clearly invoke notions of purity and pollution to ascertain superiority and inferiority on a relational scale to persons, places and things. It is not as straightforward to determine the status of each caste on the purity scale in the Indian caste context. However, it is on the basis of notions of purity and pollution that one caste group negotiates its relational status with the other groups. The low social status assigned to Dalits in the caste hierarchy is on the basis of their ‘polluting’ nature.

iii) Religious codes undergird and validate hierarchy in both the contexts based on the notions of purity and pollution. The *varnasramadharma* and the *Manusmrithi* provide the theological foundations for the marginalization of the Dalits in the Indian context whereas in the jewish context the foundations are the Levitic codes and the Pharisaic legislations. These foundations give a sacrosanct status to both hierarchy and marginalization. Notions of purity and pollution derive their religious sanctions and ‘legitimations’ from these codes.

iv) The social function of stratification which inheres in all notions of purity and pollution can be conflated with the usurpation of autonomy of the powerless by the dominant. The powerful and the dominant interpret

[35] Neyrey, ‘The Idea’, pp. 91–127; ‘The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts’, pp. 279, 280.

and validate the notions of pure and impure. If the Brahmins are usually accused of reinforcing these in the Indian system, we can see the Priests, Pharisees and Scribes acting as boundary keepers in the synoptic gospels.

v) Relational situatedness on the purity scale corresponds to the degree of proximity or estrangement from the religious centres of the dominant group. Lepers, menstruant women and those defiled by contagion are kept away from the camp and the sanctuary. In some Indian villages Dalits are denied entry into temples and are kept away from religious centres for fear of polluting the holy space.

vi) We need to acknowledge the differences between the two contexts as well. Dalit impurity is considered as permanent impurity whereas the impurity in synoptic sickness is socially considered as reversible impurity. Nevertheless, what is important is to recognize that these states of impurity and their concomitant inferiority are not ontological, but socially and religiously ascribed. This is crucial if we are considering the hermeneutical compatibility of the two contexts along an analogical basis.

An understanding of notions of purity and pollution as constituting social semiotics is crucial if we are exploring the possibility of offering an ethical framework to evaluate caste-based discrimination. These symbolics of social order constitute the very grammar of social semiotics as they condition groups to perceive their place in society in accordance with the prescribed values and 'norms', enunciated and evoked by this pattern of social semiotics. The danger arises when in this patterning there are inherent spores of disenfranchisement and social ostracism. It is this aspect which I hold to be analogical between the context of the synoptic gospels and the Indian caste context. The sick and the 'sinners' constituted the disenfranchised groups in j udaism while in casteism they are the Dalits – both I consider as victims of the semiotics of social order. I feel that when we focus on this aspect there is a widening of our scope to provide an ethical critique without succumbing to the common pitfalls of political-hermeneutics, namely anachronism and cultural relativism.

The Healing Stories as Providing Models of Christic Praxis

The concept of 'Reign of God/Kingdom of God' is central for any Christian ethical action. As Sobrino puts it:

> When one attempts to reproduce the following of j esus, then the Reign of God reappears once more in a central place. Let us recall that, in the first stage of j esus' public life, discipleship or following meant proclaiming and positing signs of the Reign, while in the second stage it meant steadfastness in the face /of

> the mighty reaction of the anti-Reign. Without the Reign of God the following of j esus would have neither its motivation or its central content.[36]

The ethics of the Reign of God is integral to the praxis of j esus as reflected in the healing stories. Therefore, there is the possibility of identifying a praxiological prototype in the synoptic healing stories which helps us to reproduce our own praxis, which can and must be examined in terms of the essential elements of j esus' life.[37] This makes it incumbent on us to consider the synoptic healing stories as a viable paradigm to delineate models of social practice relevant for the context of caste-based discrimination.

We can talk of the healing stories as points of intersection of soteriology and the ethics of the Reign of God. Gerd Theissen's interpretation and understanding of the healing stories of j esus places them within the ambit of soteriology. Theissen argues for understanding the miracles as the episodic realization of salvation in the present in a manner that is consistent with the broader picture of apocalyptic soteriological expectation. He perceives that through the healings j esus combined two conceptual worlds, namely the apocalyptic expectation of a futuristic universal salvation and the realization of salvation in the present.[38] Stanton claims that the message and miracles of j esus go together. According to him, j esus' own insistence was that his miracles and exorcisms embodied and acted out his message of the Kingdom of God.[39] His contention is that j esus believed himself to be the proclaimer of God's good news to the poor. Through his elucidation of the characteristic features of the 'poor' to whom the good news of God is proclaimed through j esus, Stanton sheds more light on the nature of j esus' ministry:

> They (the poor) are people who are experiencing oppression and helplessness, including those living in dire poverty. They are the blind, the lame, the lepers and the deaf whom j esus heals as a sign of the coming of God's kingly rule. They are the tax collectors and sinners to whom j esus extends table fellowship in the teeth of vigorous opposition. The message, miracles and actions of j esus focused on the socially and religiously marginalized, for God's kingly rule belonged to them.[40]

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[36] j on Sobrino, 'Systematic Christology: j esus Christ, The Absolute Mediator of the Reign of God', in j on Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuria (eds), *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1996) (pp. 124–45), p. 133.

[37] j on Sobrino, 'Spirituality and the Following of j esus', in Sobrino and Ellacuria (eds), *Systematic Theology* (pp. 233–56), p. 243.

[38] Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: t & T Clark and Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 278.

[39] Stanton, 'Message', p. 57.

[40] Stanton, 'Message', p. 71.

Stanton links the healing stories with the Kingdom of God. According to Stanton, j esus claimed that his healing activity, which was carried out among those on the 'fringes of society, was in fulfilment of the promises for the coming age referred to in Isaiah 29:18–19; 35:5–6; 61:1'. He adopts a line of thought that is similar to the line adopted by Theissen and argues that j esus perceived the healings as 'signs of the breaking in' of God's kingly reign. However, he adds that miracles like parables were 'signs' but not proof of the Kingdom of God and were intended by j esus to mediate to those who had eyes to see and ears to hear the reality of God's kingly rule.[41]

In continuity with Theissen's argument, of the historical impingement of eschatological salvation in the present (through the miracle stories), Christopher Rowland also reflects on how in the New Testament the present is understood as the time of fulfilment:

> The significance of the present is so integral to the understanding of God's propitious time that history is the arena for eschatologically significant actions. In the New Testament the present becomes a moment of opportunity for transforming the imperfect into the perfect; history and eschatology become inextricably intertwined.[42]

On the basis of this argument it is hard to discount that the synoptic healing stories in many ways embody that crucial dialogical juncture between the temporal and the spatial aspects of the Kingdom of God. There is manifestation of salvific continuity in the healing stories. Through this episodic realization of salvation one gets to understand that the ethical imperative of the imminence of the Kingdom is not a futuristic-oriented passivity but action tempered by the realization that the Kingdom belongs to the poor. It is the present concern for the poor that characterizes both the healings of j esus and the message of the Kingdom. As one recognizes this crucial and dialectic embodiment of the message in the healing episodes one can realize that one can divest neither the healing stories nor the message of the Kingdom of God of any political connotations. Rowland's observation of the healing stories makes it clear that j esus' healings were not altogether apolitical in their consequences. Registering the need for more attention toward the political character of the actions of j esus in the gospels, Rowland also evokes attention to the subtleties of the political nature of j esus' actions and clarifies the basis for his own attestation as to how he perceives the 'political' nature of j esus' actions. Understanding the political message of j esus' actions in this context in relation to the conventional patterns of human interaction and organization, Rowland says:

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[41] Stanton, 'Message', p. 68.

[42] Christopher Rowland, 'Reflections on the Politics of the Gospels', in R.S. Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God and Human Society* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) (pp. 224–41), p. 232.

> The political challenge posed by j esus involved departures from norms of behaviour, status, attitude and access to social intercourse which are typical of a particular society. The narratives of j esus' actions portray a challenge to conventions and imply different standards of human relating. The touching of lepers and of 'unclean' women, the restoration of those excluded as 'mad', the healing of paralytics and blind, whose disabilities inevitably caused impoverishment, signify sitting loose to boundaries of conviction and a preparedness to countenance in human action something different which claims to be restorative. There is, of course, nothing that is unconventional about healing the sick but the challenge and perhaps even the breaking of 'taboos' represent a shake up of the personal relationships which constitute the fabric of social relations, the very stuff of politics.[43]

Thus, Rowland affirms the political nature of j esus' praxis.

According to Latin American liberation theologian Leonardo Boff, j esus utilizes the term the Kingdom of God to 'revive hopes for total liberation' from potentially alienating social-political and religious mechanisms. Locating j esus in his socio-political and cultural context, Boff points to j esus' critical transcendence of the prevailing circumstances. For Boff the real oppression in j esus' time can be attributed to 'the legalistic interpretation of religion and the will of God', which characterized post-exilic j udaism.[44] It was the hegemonic degeneration and manifestation of this obsession towards a rigid cultivation of the law which evoked in j esus a stringent proclamation of a final end which called 'into question all immediate interests of a social, political or religious nature'.[45] j esus announces the immanence of the 'hoped for new and reconciled world' in their very midst. The Kingdom rhetoric of j esus is also interlinked closely to the practical and social implications of j esus' preaching and way of life which signified realized eschatology. Boff understands j esus' praxis as crystallizing the eschaton which was very much immanent. 'That absolute goal and end was mediated through concrete gestures, anticipated in surprising behaviour patterns, and made tangible in attitudes that signified that the end was already present somehow in the midst of this life'.[46] Boff's interpretation of j esus' praxis points to j esus' rejection of the misuse of power. He finds in j esus' praxis a tangible representation of the power of God's love to inaugurate a new order which refrains from violation of people's freedom or exempts people from the task of taking responsibility for their human project. j esus inaugurates this process of liberation where ritual service is

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43 Rowland, 'Reflections', pp. 239–40.

44 Leonardo Boff, 'Christ's Liberation via Oppression', in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Frontiers of Theology in Latin America* (London: SCM, 1979) (pp. 100–132), p. 105.

45 Boff, 'Christ's', p. 106.

46 Boff, 'Christ's', p. 109.

subordinated to the concerns of the people and where fellowship transcends patterns of social conformity to include the outcasts or those discriminated against.[47]

j ohn Riches further helps in clarifying what Boff means when he talks of elements of the life and death of j esus which transcended the circumstances of his time and which can be fruitfully applied to Boff's own context. Dividing Boff's views into two categories Riches says:

> On the one hand he (Boff) identifies in j esus' teaching and actions a commitment to certain values: of love, of openness, of human interdependence and freedom. On the other he derives from j esus' proclamation of the kingdom certain views about the course of history: (1) it is tending towards some point where our regionalisation of meaning, the attempts of particular societies, to build themselves a world of meaning which excludes, marginalizes and therefore oppresses others, will be overcome and (2) a belief that meanwhile it is the task of those faithful to the gospel to 'anticipate' that final global meaning, to mediate it through concrete acts which, while they will not themselves bring in the kingdom, are nevertheless pointers to others, forms of proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom of God.[48]

Following on from that, he suggests that a closer examination of the interrelation between j esus' beliefs and actions and the social, cultural and political realities prevailing during j esus' time would provide further clarification and insight. He identifies that Boff's interpretation of j esus' transcendence of circumstances and regionalization of meaning theoretically relied on contrasting j esus' teachings and praxis with the narrow legalism of the Pharisees. Suggesting that a movement beyond such common portrayal warranted fruitful results, Riches takes recourse to social historical approaches for assistance and, interestingly, discerns in Mary Douglas' account of purity regulations in *Purity and Danger* assistance to understand j esus' praxis in proper perspective. Drawing insights from Douglas, about the important function of purity regulations being the reinforcement of external and internal boundaries of the group, Riches identifies the Pharisaic attention to cultivation of purity rules as a natural tendency to set tighter lines around the group which was characterized on ethnic and religious lines.[49] Against

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[47] j ohn Riches, 'Biblical Theology and the Pressing Concerns of the Church', in R.S. Barbour (ed.), *The Kingdom of God and Human Society* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993) (pp. 256–79), p. 259.

[48] Riches, 'Biblical', p. 261.

[49] This sustained focus on Pharisaic purity regulations by Riches in this article is because he is reviewing Boff's own references to the narrow legalism of the Pharisees. He points out that if Neusner's argument that 'even before 70 C.E. the Pharisees were engaged in a process of transferring the centre of the cult away from the temple to the home and local community' was right, 'then that transference was in all likelihood related to attempts to set up strong social boundaries around the group, organized now less as a

this insight he perceives promising ways of understanding j esus' teaching and behaviour which 'evince a very surprising openness in a society where there were forces at work attempting to strengthen group boundaries'.[50] According to Riches, the nature of j esus' openness:

> (w)as not simply the rejection of a narrow legalistic vision of God and the social practices which flow from it; it is rather to be seen as a rejection of attempts on the part of religious leaders to forge the people into a more cohesive group in an alien world. Sharing the same table with those who are significantly socially deviant, who live at odds with the group's norms, or who indeed are agents of an alien and threatening power, is clearly very different from keeping oneself apart from such people and associating as far as possible only with members of one's own group.[51]

Riches's concerns are more to emphasize the openness of j esus in transcending the social strictures imposed by purity concerns and so his arguments are applicable and relevant to our present attempts in working out ethical principles on the basis of j esus' attitude to purity concerns – where purity concerns are predominantly understood in relational reference to the realm of sickness and disease. What emerges clearly is j esus' vision to forge inclusiveness in a context where the prevailing dictum was exclusivism.

Howard Clark Kee also understands the healings of j esus in a proleptic sense in relation to the reign of God:

> The framework of meaning in which these stories of j esus' healings are told is not one which assumes that the proper formula or the correct technique will produce the desired results. Rather the healings and exorcisms are placed in a larger structure which sees what is happening as clues and foretastes of a new situation in which the purpose of God will finally be accomplished in the creation and his people will be vindicated and at peace.[52]

Kee also touches on the relationship between purity and separation of human beings in their social interaction and sees these activities of j esus as opening up 'participation in the group of his followers in circumstances which directly violated the j ewish (and especially Pharisaic) rules of separation'.[53]

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nation state than as an ethnic, religious community' (p. 262). See also j ohn Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), Chapter 6 and Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

[50] Riches, 'Biblical', p. 263.

[51] Riches, 'Biblical', p. 263.

[52] Kee, *Medicine*, p. 79.

[53] Kee, *Medicine*, p. 78.

j ames Dunn, problematizes the question of the attitude of j esus towards the purity rules. Dunn brings out the point that maintenance of purity was not an issue related to worship in the Temple alone but it was an issue central to the 'definition of Second Temple j ewish identity and in enforcing the corollary of separation'.[54] Purity/impurity 'was not regarded as a matter of insignificance or to be treated lightly'. It was sought on a regular basis even at distances so remote from the Temple, because 'impurity was regarded as undesirable, to be avoided as much as possible, and to be removed at the earliest opportunity'.[55] According to Dunn, the implications of purity/impurity for j udaism as a whole would mean that 'j esus the devout j ew would have shared that concern'. If so, would it be correct to conclude that 'j esus went out of his way to undermine purity rules'? Given his observation that it was not wrong or sinful to contact impurity, Dunn advocates caution about interpreting j esus' actions of healing as defiance of the purity code. However, he refers attention to the argument for emphasis on j esus' own purity rather than j esus' attitude to rules regarding impurity. Here j esus' actions can be interpreted as countering the contagion of impurity with the contagion of purity. Holiness was for j esus a positive healing force rather than a negative defiling force. Making a further brief referential analysis of episodes of j esus' healing, Dunn's interpretation of j esus' attitude towards purity is summed up as follows:

> Much the same can be said in regard to the episodes in j esus tradition where j esus encounters the other main sources of impurity – corpse impurity (Mark 5.1–20, 21–4, 35–43; Luke 17.11–17) and discharge impurity (particularly mark 5.25–34). To be noted is the fact that j esus is not remembered as going out of his way to defy the relevant purity laws: he incurred the first by his concern for those struck by tragedy; and he incurred the second by the action of someone else (the woman with the haemorrhage). At the same time, the stories do not make the purity issue explicit, though for any j ew telling or hearing these stories the purity implications would have been inescapable. The point is rather that j esus seems to disregard the impurity consequences in such cases, so that it may be fairly concluded that j esus was indifferent to such purity issues. And once again it may be valid to deduce that in these episodes we see the power of holiness countering the contagion of impurity.[56]

There may be a seemingly apolitical character at the outset when we consider the above rhetoric – about the power of j esus's holiness countering the contagion of impurity. But it is not necessarily so, because the total disregard for a religio-cultural semiotic which stratified society and defined acceptable social interaction has a distinctively political character. Disregard towards an operant cultural

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54 j ames G. Dunn, 'j esus and Purity: An Ongoing Debate', in *NTS*, Vol. 48, 2002 (pp. 449–67), p. 451.

55 Dunn, 'j esus', p. 452.

56 Dunn, 'j esus', p. 461.

principle implies an undermining of its importance and is thus political. Dunn concludes that there was no echo of the concern to profess Israel's set-apartness in j esus' conduct and association with different people (fellow j ews, 'sinners' and Gentiles). Thus if 'purity was a concern for j esus, it was an inclusive, not an exclusive, purity'.[57]

Marcus Borg clearly delineates two approaches in j esus' teaching regarding the paradigm of holiness which he finds applicable to individual instances. They are the replacement approach, and the redefinition approach. Borg maintains that in some texts holiness is replaced by another core value – compassion – and in others holiness is understood in a manner different from the prevalent conception in first-century j udaism.[58] Under the replacement approach Borg posits that j esus substituted the paradigm of compassion for the paradigm of holiness and under the redefinition approach he posits that j esus modifies holiness as a transforming power which overpowered uncleanness rather than the converse.[59] Borg alludes to the various healing stories of j esus which are related to purity concerns, like the healing of the leper in Mark 1:40–45, the healing of the woman with discharge in Mark 5:25–34 and the story of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1–20, and concludes that 'these stories, most or all current in a Palestinian milieu in which the significance of uncleanness was well understood, reflect the j esus movement's affirmation that holiness, far from needing protection, was an active dynamic power that overcame uncleanness.'[60]

The healings stories are not the only biblical resources which reflect j esus' attitude towards notions of purity and pollution. The open commensality practised by j esus through his table fellowship is another crucial source. Norman Perrin places the table fellowship as 'the central feature' of j esus' ministry.[61] Geza Vermes points to the table fellowship as the distinct feature of j esus' ministry, which characterized the difference of j esus' ministry from that of his contemporaries as well as his prophetic predecessors.[62] Both the healing acts and the table fellowship can be interpreted as resistance through subversion of the symbolic order of holiness. When discussing j esus' open commensality and his healing stories I find Crossan's mapping of the locatedness of j esus' praxis between the covert and the overt insightful. Crossan judges j esus' praxis in the following manner:

> What j esus was doing is located exactly between the covert and the overt acts of resistance. It was not, of course, as open as the acts of protestors, prophets,

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57 Dunn, 'j esus', p. 465.

58 Marcus j. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness, and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998) (new edn), pp. 92, 93.

59 Borg, *Conflict*, pp. 147–8.

60 Borg, *Conflict*, pp. 147–8.

61 Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 107.

62 Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 224.

> bandits, or messiahs. But it was more open than playing dumb, imagining revenge, or simply recalling Mosaic or Davidic ideals. His eating and healing were in theory and practice the borderline between the private and the public, covert and overt, secret and open resistance.[63]

Both the healing stories as well as the accounts of his social intercourse portray him as defying the rules of segregation fostered by the 'symbolic order of j udaism'. Thus, my contention is that any paradigm to critique casteism as a system which perpetuates itself through division and discrimination should emerge out of an interaction with these examples of Christ where we find j esus resisting hegemonic social and religious structures based on notions of purity and pollution which created asymmetries and divisions between collective social and ethnic entities.

The core of the arguments elucidated above point to an inextricable intertwining between ethical action, the ideals of Kingdom of God and soteriology. I strongly perceive in the synoptic healing stories a concrete and historical incarnation of this intertwining. The synoptic healing stories bring to the fore the concerns of the Kingdom of God inaugurated by j esus. Though not divesting salvation of its eschatological nature, the healing stories validate the historical processes and actions needed for its culmination. These healing stories furnish us with the hermeneutical key by which one can dispense with all 'objectivizing rhetoric' of the eschaton and explore the ethical and concrete translation of the praxis of j esus in contexts of discrimination, disenfranchisement and marginalization. In short, they give us insights into the nature of 'Christic-praxis' or the praxis of j esus, with the implication being that our own praxis should be evolved in close conformity to j esus' praxis. Thus, theoretically, the proposal to resource the synoptic healing stories seems to hold sufficient ethical potency. The fact that j esus is at the core of the healing stories gives the healing stories the needed Christo-centric thrust. Therefore, on the basis of our consideration of the synoptic healing stories as a possible alternative paradigm for Dalit theology, we can conclude that synoptic healing stories can constitute the foundations on which ethical principles can be derived which will be helpful in addressing the lacunae between Dalit theology and praxis.

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[63] j ohn Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995) (paperback edn), p. 105.

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Chapter 4
A Christian Ethical Framework of Action

When we critically analysed Dalit theology we concluded earlier that in order for caste practices within the Church to be considerably affected there was a need for an ethical framework which impinged upon the behavioural patterns of people belonging to both the Dalit communities and dominant castes. The present chapter takes up this challenge of identifying such an ethical framework. It is argued that the Synoptic Healing Stories not only offer us a broad ethical paradigm to critique caste but also offer us specific ethical principles of liberative action which can be pertinent in the context of caste-based discrimination.

A good example of identifying Christian ethical principles in the synoptic healing stories which can be used in secular ethics has been set by Robin Gill in his *Healthcare and Christian Ethics*.[1] Though Gill recognizes that there is an inevitable element of reader response when biblical texts are approached with a specific focus, he reckons that approximate ways of counting are possible which can enable the identification of the most prevalent values that are actually present in biblical texts independent of the person studying them.[2] In his attempt to identify a primary biblical resource for healthcare ethics, Gill identifies six prevalent features contained in the synoptic healing stories, namely *passionate emotion*, *faith*, *mercy or compassion*, *touching*, *uncleanness*, *reticence/restraint*.[3] Gill's method of identifying the prevalent features helps one to make an objective evaluation of the prevailing features. I consider Gill's efforts to be also useful for my own task. However, taking into consideration the fluidity and interpenetrating nature of these features and bearing in mind the focus of my study, I have identified four features

[1] Robin Gill, *Healthcare and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[2] With specific reference to the study of the predominant features of the synoptic healing stories (which he does with focus on a concern for healing within the context of Western medicine), he points out that 'at most any system of counting involves identifying rough prevalence'. He uses a method of 'weighting' to identify the most prevalent features of the healing stories, which involves 'giving a full weighting to a primary occurrence in one of the synoptic sources and just half a weighting for a parallel occurrence (judging the latter to be not without significance yet not as significant as the former)'. Robin Gill, 'Health Care, jesus and the Church', in *Ecclesiology: The Journal for Ministry, Mission and Unity*, Vol. I. No. 1 (London: Continuum Publishing Group Ltd, 2004) (pp. 37–55), pp. 39, 40.

[3] Gill, 'Health Care', pp. 40–43.

to be relevant to the objectives of this for this study, namely – touch/uncleanness; faith; mercy/compassion; conflict/confrontation.

Touch/Uncleanness

This feature can be best understood in the light of the purity maps and regulations that we analysed in the previous chapter. In a context where notions of purity and pollution are assumed to have governed social interaction as well as spatial mobility, the purity maps and regulations serve as appropriate tools to enable us to discern the implicit and explicit manner in which notions of purity and pollution operate in the context of the synoptic healing stories and to identify the various ways in which defiance of uncleanness is implicit in the actions of j esus and other characters. They also help us to recognize the subversive significance of touch in the context of the healing stories. Understanding these aspects of uncleanness will give more completeness to understanding j esus' restorative actions.[4]

On the basis of the centrality of purity and pollution in the j udaism of j esus' time, we can discern uncleanness in the following contexts. In Luke 5:12 the leper is portrayed as being 'covered with leprosy'. Mark 1:21 talks about the exorcism of an unclean spirit in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. In Luke 4:33 and 8:29 j esus deals with unclean spirits. The story of j airus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman (Mt 19:18–26; Mk 5:22–43; Lk 8:44 ff) has women in two unclean physical states, namely menstruation and death. j esus uses the word 'dog' to refer to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:26 and the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:27. In all the stories about lepers, demoniacs and menstruants impurity is implicit, as it is in the stories which involve using bodily effluvia (Mk 7:33; 8:22). We find the mention of clean/unclean in various contexts of the healing stories. Though we cannot conclude that impurity was contacted in all circumstances, we have seen specific instances where taboos of contagion were high – especially corpse defilement, menstruation and leprosy. But uncleanness should be understood in relation to the inferior social and religious status associated with it. Most of the people j esus deals with in his healing episodes can be 'defined as "out of bounds" by religious categories'.[5]

Having understood purity as 'order' and strict maintenance of boundaries, certain places can be considered as being off limits and impure. j esus' healings involve moving in gentile territory. Gentile territories are often associated with demoniacs and unclean spirits in the healing stories. So, we need to be perceptive

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[4] j ohn. Pilch, 'Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis', in *BTB*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 1985 (pp. 142–50), pp. 142 ff.

[5] Donald H. j uel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 73. According to him, the man with the unclean spirit, the possessed gentile in the land of the Gerasenes, the leper, and the woman with the haemorrhage, the gentile woman who comes to beg for her daughter are all impure according to the standards of the law.

about the connotations of pollution that such territories indicate. Gentile lands do not even feature on Neyrey's map of places. In Luke 8:26, in Gerasenes the person affected by Legion lives in tombs – the realm of uncleanness. In the story of the healing of the ten lepers we see the lepers living outside the cities. Even in their approach to Jesus, the lepers maintain their distance, thus reflecting the boundaries entrenched in their psyche. The Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman is a gentile, as is the centurion of Capernaum: Jesus still moves to their place. Defiance of the uncleanness related to places and people can be discerned when Jesus moves to 'gentile' and polluted places and interacts with 'polluted people'.

We find touch being used for healing in various situations where the risk of contagion/contacting impurity is highest. Jesus responds to the leper with a touch in the process of healing (Mt 8:3; Mk 1:41; Lk 5:13). Jesus heals by risking corpse-defilement when he touches the brier of the widow of Nain's son in Luke 7:14. In the story of Jairus' daughter and the haemorrhaging woman, where both physical states carry immense implications of pollution, the healing is effected through touch. Peter's mother-in-law is healed by touch in Mark and Matthew (Mt 7:15; Mk 1:31). In Luke 13:13 the woman who had been crippled for eighteen years is healed when Jesus lays his hands on her. Jesus uses touch to heal the two blind men in Matthew 9:29. Jesus also uses 'contagious bodily effluvia' in the healing process at certain times. In the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, found in Mark 8:22, Jesus heals by touch using saliva. Jesus uses spittle to heal the deaf man suffering from impeded speech in Mark 7:33. We need to understand these acts in the light of the understanding of purity and uncleanness that we have received from our analysis of the purity and pollution codes that influenced social life in that context. There are also situations where the pleas of the ill are pleas for cleansing, and the healing of Jesus involves a strong element of 'declaring clean'. The leper's plea which is found in all the three gospels is a plea to make him clean (Mt 8:2; Mk 1:40; Lk 5:12). Jesus pronounces the leper clean in all three Gospels. Luke 17:14 reports that ten lepers were made clean.

On the basis of all these factors we can say that uncleanness is either implicitly or explicitly a predominant feature of the healing stories. Touch is also invariably related to the feature of uncleanness. However, the theme of uncleanness furnishes the background against which to understand the other three features. Hence, uncleanness is strictly not an ethical principle. But its related feature, touch, is an ethical principle because it involves breaking conventional behaviour. Jesus' actions of touching is a challenge to the social structure.[6] By healing through *touch* Jesus brings the 'polluting' outsider into communion.[7] The subversive praxis of Jesus is made manifest by his actions, which defy the holiness code.

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[6] L. Stanislaus, 'Healing and Exorcisms: Dalit Perspectives', in *VJTR*, Vol. 63, 1999 (pp. 192–9), p. 197.

[7] Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), p. 261.

Touch, understood as defiance of uncleanness, should be studied in relation with other features because it is interrelated with the other features as well. For example, the initiative of the haemorrhaging woman to touch Jesus can be classified under both initiative (faith) as well as defiance of uncleanness. Jesus' moving into symbolic gentile territory as well as healing Gentiles can be subsumed under both compassion as well as defiance of uncleanness. The distinctness of this feature is that it attacks the religious legitimizing of inferiority. It comes forth as a publicly 'significant' act which subverts the semiotics of social classification. Because of the interpenetrative nature of this feature, as well as the fact that considerable attention has already been paid to understanding the background for uncleanness, I propose that we analyse the feature of touch as defiance of uncleanness along with the other three features and delineate the various points where this feature comes pronouncedly to the fore.

Faith

In the context of the synoptic healing stories, faith can be understood as being manifest in the *initiative taken* in approaching Jesus to be healed and the *persistence* of those who seek healing for themselves.

We find faith as *initiative* appearing at several places in the healing stories. In the healing of Peter's mother-in-law her condition is 'told to Jesus *at once*' in Mark 1:30. The leper in all the three gospels (Mt 8:2; Mk 1:40; Lk 5:12) approaches Jesus, saying if you choose you *can* make me clean. The Capernaum centurion takes initiative for the healing of his slave in Luke 7:3 ff. Both Jairus and the haemorrhaging women approach Jesus in faith in all three gospels. The ten lepers, though hindered by distance which excluded them, take the initiative in calling to Jesus for healing in Luke 17:12 and 13. The blind man on the road to Jericho, upon hearing that Jesus is passing along, takes the initiative to become healed. In Matthew 15:22/Mark 7:25 ff, the Canaanite/Syrophoenician woman takes the initiative in approaching Jesus for the healing of her demon-possessed daughter. The father of the spirit possessed boy affirms his belief in Jesus' exorcising powers in Mark 9:23.

Faith as *persistence* is prominent in Mark's version of the healing of the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12. Four men overcome obstacles (the crowd and the roof) as they lower the mat on which the paralytic lay before Jesus. In Luke 9:37 the father of the demon-possessed boy is persistent in his efforts to get his son healed. After the disciples fail to cast out the demon the man 'shouts' to Jesus for help. Despite being sternly ordered to be quiet, the blind man on the road to Jericho persists in his pleas for mercy and Jesus acknowledges this persistence as faith in Luke 18:42. In the story of blind Bartimaeus found in Mark 10:46, Bartimaeus refuses to be silenced and Jesus acknowledges this as faith. The two blind men in Matthew 9:28 also respond affirmatively to Jesus' question, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' The Canaanite woman persists in her pleas to such an

extent that the disciples consider her a disturbance. However, Jesus recognizes her persistence as faith (Mt 15:28).

Human initiative and persistence amidst obstacles therefore are the two predominant manifestations of *faith* in the healing stories. Seen from this perspective, there is an element of boundary transcendence implicit in this feature because humans consciously take the efforts to transcend the factors that limit human possibilities to be whole and valued. The agency for the boundary transcendence rests on human initiative and persistence. These two manifestations of faith denote the importance of human participation in acts of transformation and emancipation. Thus, when understood in a praxiological sense *faith* puts huge implications on human participation and human agency. If one is talking of the feature of faith in praxiological terms, one should also recognize the participatory nature of human initiative. As we have seen so far, human initiative for healing is reflected in the pleas of people for healing. Sometimes this initiative is taken by people acting on behalf of the ill. Theissen talks of 'representatives', with the reference applying to people who make petitions on behalf of the 'sick' – petitioners. He finds the motif of faith inter-related with the appearance of these representatives. According to him:

> The representative is the paradigm of a request made in faith (Mt 8:5 ff; Mk 5:21 ff; 7:34 ff; 9:14 ff). While the motif of faith is independent of that of the 'representative', the latter in the New Testament is never independent of the motif of faith. The two are associated motifs. [8]

Another related motif in association with which *faith* in the healing stories occurs is the motif of impediment. Very often the supplicant/s of the miracle stories has(ve) difficulties in approaching Jesus. Their approach is impeded by various factors. In the healing of the paralytic found in (Mk 2:4) the paralytic had to be let down through the roof to Jesus because of the crowd. The Matthean version of the 'Canaanite woman' puts partial responsibility on the disciples in dissuading her from getting healing for her daughter. In what is widely considered to be the episode which portrays Jesus' perception of his Gentile ministry, the story of the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus himself appears to be an 'impediment' to the healing process.[9] The centurion from Capernaum and the Syrophoenician woman overcome the barrier of ethnic division when they plead for Jesus to effect healing. The father of the epileptic boy has to move beyond the disciples' impotence to reach Jesus (Mk 9:14 ff). The crowd in a way hinders the approach of the haemorrhaging woman. Therefore, what comes to the fore is the concern for people to cross boundaries. The companions of Jesus also drive blind Bartimaeus

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[8] Gerd Theissen, *The Miracle Stories of the Early Christian Traditio* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 49.

[9] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

away before jesus takes notice of him (Mk 10:48).[10] It is interesting to note that faith and 'impediment' are associated. Faith in these 'contexts' implies overcoming obstacles. One can also use the language of boundary-transcendence in relation to this aspect of overcoming obstacles.

Another striking feature of such contexts where people persevere amidst obstacles is the mention of the words 'believe' or 'faith' by jesus to the suppliants. The people who make petitions for others cross boundaries and overcome obstacles to the extent that the healing is attributed to their efforts/faith by jesus. jesus identifies their persistent efforts as faith (Mk 2:5). There is acknowledgement of the faith of the suppliants while dismissing them (Mk 5:34; 10:52; Mt 15:28; cf Mk 7:29), and the language of faith is used in exhorting the suppliants to confidence.[11] Theissen analytically brings out the different ways in which faith is manifest in the three gospels from the perspective of boundary crossing:

> In Mark faith is the crossing of a boundary seen from a voluntaristic point of view. In Matthew a cognitive element is added: the conviction expressed in the petition; in Luke the affective aspect is dominant, acclamation and gratitude are regarded as the essence of faith. In other words, faith is simply the crossing of the boundaries of the human, and is associated in turn with different aspects of that crossing. 'Faith' is therefore not just one motif among other motifs of boundary crossing associated with human characters, but the essence of all motifs of boundary crossing. This faith is, however, always recognized by the divine miracle worker. The word occurs almost only on his lips: it is only the revelation of the sacred which provides crossing of the boundary and legitimates them. In the reproduction of the miracle stories this revelation is realised in the three synoptics from different points of view.[12]

There is also a response element in the healing stories. Many respond with gratitude and some insist on following jesus. One can also argue that the theme of faith can be linked to discipleship. The story of blind Bartimaeus found in Mark 10:46–52 shows how the theme of discipleship is related to the theme of faith. The story has been categorized as a legend because the story 'as it now stands in Mark had as its intention something other than the narration of a wondrous healing by jesus. A healing is present in the story but in such abbreviated form that it appears to have been subordinated to some other intention'.[13] The point that is sought to be focused in this story is the example of Bartimaeus himself, who epitomizes persistent faith – faith which persists to the point of even following jesus and

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[10] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 52.

[11] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

[12] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 139.

[13] Paul j. Achtemeier, ' "And He Followed Him": Miracles and Discipleship in Mark 10:46–52', in *Semeia*, Vol. 11 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978) (pp. 115–45), p. 121.

which is worthy of emulation.[14] Thus, faith can be understood as also being related to discipleship. The emphasis on relating healing to discipleship varies with the synoptic writers:

> More than any other evangelist, Luke appends to miracle stories references to the fact that those who had observed the miracles, or who had benefited from them, give praise to God (e.g., 5:25; 7:16; 9:43; 13:13; 17:15; 18:43), an attitude which belongs to the Lukan understanding of faith (cf Acts 1:13; 2:22–23, 36; 4:77; 10:38). The emphasis on 'seeing' in Luke, less prominent in the other Gospels, also points to the significance of miracles for faith in Jesus (compare with their parallels, Lk 10:23–5, 19:37) and Luke's use of the story of the ten Lepers (17:11–19) in the context of a discussion of the meaning of faith (17:1–10) shows further the significance of this connection.[15]

Therefore, in praxiological terms if we were to understand faith it has to be understood as human participation in God's acts of wholeness. It tells us how the component of human participation is integral to emancipation. This initiative can be the result of subjective or objective experience of being treated as disvalued beings. Related to this aspect of faith is also the concept of autonomy where there is a conscious engagement to free themselves from bondage. The implications of an understanding of faith as participatory and persistent action, with regard to the praxis of the Indian Church in the Dalit context, has been interestingly brought out by M. Azariah. Using the story of the paralytic who is lowered from the roof before Jesus by his four friends as a paradigm, Azariah elucidates what *faith* which is manifest in human action can mean for the Indian church as follows. According to Azariah:

> Jesus was impressed with the faith of these four men that could laugh at all barriers. These men had the compassion and the courage to be in solidarity with the victim of a paralysis that had long crippled not only the body but also the mind and spirit of that patient (who might have lost faith in getting healed long time ago, possibly suffering with his wounded psyche) … seeing the faith of the four men, Jesus proceeded to heal the paralytic. Indeed the process of healing (catharsis) had already begun in the various steps of barrier-crossing taken by the four men of faith (or the community of faith) in solidarity with the victim of paralysis. We can imagine the paralytic himself resisting the initial moves of the four men who had to find a stretcher, then carry him some distance and, when at the door of the house where Jesus was, found only impossibilities and obstacles and barriers – each of which, however, the faith of the four men could overcome … .the point of the paradigm case for the Indian church to learn, I would like to think, is the fact of *being in solidarity with the victim* not only by the four men

14 Achtemeier, '"And He Followed Him"', p. 122.

15 Achtemeier, '"And He Followed Him"', pp. 133, 134.

> who carried him to jesus but jesus himself *being in solidarity with the victim* at the deeper levels of his inner being where 'faith, sin and forgiveness' operate.[16]

From this perspective we can understand that in order for holistic healing to take place human effort is needed. There is a need to recognize their agency as participators in God's restorative acts. In a praxis-oriented reading of *faith*, participatory action, perseverance, solidarity and discipleship emerge as related values.

Conflict/Confrontation: Pedagogical Content

The synoptic gospels have stories of those confrontational discourses whereby jesus acts in a way which is considered 'inappropriate' and then explains to the people about what needs to be done. In jesus' first 'healing' in Mark, dealing with the exorcism of an unclean spirit, the crowd is amazed and understands jesus' actions as teaching. However, they quiz among themselves about its content, which they find to be perplexing (Mk 1:27). Confrontation is also implicit in the story of the leper found in all the three gospels. The phrase *as a testimony to them* – which is implied to be the primary reason for jesus' command to the leper to show himself to the priest and offer the gift that Moses commanded (Mt 8:4, Mk 1:44, Lk 5:14) – is thought to be better translated as 'as a witness against them'.[17] jesus faces charges of blasphemy and confronts the Pharisees and scribes regarding his authority over forgiving the sins of the paralytic (Mt 9:3–6; Mk 2:7–10; Lk 5:21 ff). When jesus heals the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, He confronts the Pharisees with a pedagogical discourse on human worth (Mt 12:11–12; Mk 3:4; Lk 6:8–10). In Luke 13:15–17 jesus is engaged in a confrontation with the leader of the synagogue because jesus healed the woman crippled for eighteen years on the Sabbath. This confrontation follows the typology of a pedagogical discourse. A similar situation emerges in Luke 14:2–6 when jesus, while healing the man with dropsy, confronts the lawyers and Pharisees on the issue of Sabbath healing. Verse 5 follows the pattern of a pedagogical discourse.

In the healing stories which mention 'conflict/confrontation which has pedagogical content', jesus is portrayed as taking the initiative for the boundary crossing. This usually takes place as critical confrontation to the boundary keepers. In stories where legislations are crossed (rule miracles), the boundaries are stressed by jesus' 'opponents', before jesus is shown as critically repudiating them. The dissonant and dissenting voices help us to recognize the boundary-stressing aspects of the healing stories while the criticism, resentment and scepticism of the 'opponents' also help us to recognize which boundaries are crossed. jesus is confronted when he crosses role-boundaries when proclaiming forgiveness of sins (Mk 2: 5 ff), and when he breaches the Sabbath rules, thus breaking time boundaries

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[16] Azariah, 'The Church's Healing Ministry', pp. 322 ff.

[17] Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 83.

(Mk 3:1 ff; Lk 13:10 ff; Lk 14:1 ff; Mt 12:9 ff). The boundaries are sometimes stressed by the implicit or explicit questioning by the opponents. Theissen calls the stories which 'centre on the breaking of rules' as 'rule miracles' and calls their contexts 'apothegmatic miracle stories'.[18]

Usually, when criticism or allegation is made against j esus' acts of healing on the grounds that he is breaking/transcending the law, j esus' response to them involves provoking them to rethink the validity of their claims. Argumentation usually features in these stories. j esus' reply to his 'challengers' takes the form of an 'either/or question', where he contrasts the position of the challengers and his own position (Mk 2:9; Mk 3:4; Lk 14:3). Another form of argumentation is bringing out the manipulative and selective nature of the opponent's criticism by pointing out how their own behaviour conflicts with their objection of j esus breaking the law: they too rescue animals on a Sabbath (Lk 13.15 ff; 14:5).[19] This pedagogical aspect of his miracles should not be ignored. The amazement and wonder of the crowd and the disciples can also be understood as their response to the pedagogical value of j esus' teaching. In Mark 1:21–28, the crowd's response to the first healing of j esus is 'What is this? A new teaching!'. This striking proposal by Mark to understand j esus' first miracle as teaching also helps us to understand the pedagogical element in his teachings. The miracle as well as the teachings of j esus raises questions about the *authority* with which he undertakes his actions. Because he is not part of the institutionalized 'authority', his extra-institutional authority inevitably attracts hostility.

Identifying the message of love as being an important aspect of j esus' teaching, we can say that praxis- oriented pedagogy is an implicit characteristic feature of j esus' ministry. His message of love is proclaimed by word and deed.[20] j esus' teaching through his conflict and confrontation provokes the exercising of one's capacities to discern to what extent the 'boundary reinforcing' legislations had become a means of 'repressive socialization'.[21] The interactions after the healing do portray a provocation of debate where a new radical insight into one's situation seeps through. Paulo Freire's concept of 'conscientization' comes into the fore as a feature of the healing arguments.[22] Sometimes the healings teach a binary opposite of the ideologies in which the listeners have structured and interpreted reality so far. There is a subversion of the conceptual world of the listeners. The manipulative

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[18] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 57.

[19] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, pp. 59, 60

[20] Soares-Prabhu, 'j esus the Teacher: The Liberative Pedagogy of j esus of Nazareth', in *The Dharma of Jesus* (pp. 27–40), pp. 27 ff.

[21] See Arun Shouri, *Hinduism: Essence and Consequence* (Ghaziabad: Vikas, 1979) p. 372 for more on this phrase.

[22] For more on this concept, see Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972) (pp. 51–83); *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press), 1973, p. 58, and *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1972), p. 60.

notions around which their world was structured and which legitimized oppressive and alienating society is challenged by j esus's healings provoking them to think. j esus' teaching is liberative as it enables people to think. Sometimes a teacher or teaching might be paternalistic and authoritarian. j esus does not function as a depositor for knowledge upon the depositories, neither does he function as the necessary opposite of their ignorance. Rather, his healings free people to critically analyse the situation and respond to it in their own way. Some of the healed choose to follow him, some thank him, some pay no attention to the purity regulations after the healing (the leper/s), probably because they felt that it was necessary. Liberative as it made them conscious of their worth as children, this is a convincing demonstration of the freedom offered by j esus. It imparted freedom to think and involved the listener in creative response. So there is a critical and dialogical component in his actions where the accepted values of the world of the listeners are put into question.

Pointing out the importance of understanding the healing stories as challenging the structures and as pointing towards boundary transcendence, Herman Hendrickx argues as follows:

> (t)his (j esus' healing) is the most authentic signature of God in j esus' life: in him God takes up he cause of the poor (Mt 5:3; 11:5). Hence j esus' fury against a religious system that (with the best of intentions!) made it impossible for the poor to live the good news. j esus' healings on the Sabbath are a sign that the sole criterion for a religious law is that it is at the service of man (sic); liberation and not enslavement! … j esus' healings and exorcisms were mainly performed for outcasts or marginals. Here there appears a commitment and an involvement which is unknown in other miracle stories. It should be recognized how much j esus wanted to challenge and change the order and criteria of existing society.[23]

In praxiological terms, this aspect of conflict and confrontation can be understood as conscientious resistance to oppression and injustice. As praxis involves a dialectic between action and reflection, the component of pedagogy can function as the reflection – the part where people are enabled to reflect upon their actions. This critical dimension of praxis can be translated into concrete and corporate action when it is revalidated as pedagogy for a wider group. This feature of conflict/confrontation involves justice as action, which involves resisting actions which dehumanize. It also includes critical retrospection of the ethical validity of human modes of structuring 'order'.

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[23] Herman Hendrickx, *The Miracle Stories of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Geoffrey Chapman and San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 26.

Compassion/Mercy

The theme of mercy/compassion has to be understood from the perspective of both the healer and the healed because it features in the expressions of both. The pleas of the ill to jesus are *pleas for mercy* and jesus' is portrayed as being *moved by compassion* at a few places. Mark and Luke, in their version of the healing of the leper found in Mark 1:40 and Luke 5, portray him as *begging* jesus to make him clean, Matthew only mentions the *kneeling down* along with Mark whereas Luke portrays him as *bowing with his face to the ground*. jairus *begs* jesus to heal his daughter (Mk 5:22, 23; Lk 8:41)/bring her back to life (Mt 9:18). The ten lepers in Luke 17:13 beg for mercy. In Luke 9:38 the father of the demon-possessed boy begs jesus for help. The ten lepers in Luke 17:12 ff beg jesus to have mercy upon them. The blind man on the road to jericho shouts twice to jesus to have mercy on him (Lk 18:38, 39). In the healing of the two blind men in Matthew 9:27–31 the blind men cry for mercy. In a general healing, Matthew uses the language of begging to denote the response of the crowd to the healing power of jesus.

Compassion appears as jesus' response in several healing stories. In Mark 1:40 ff jesus is moved with compassion towards the leper (depending upon the version). Mark also portrays jesus as being grieved at the hardness of heart of the Pharisees in the episode of the healing of the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath (Mk 3:5). Luke reports jesus as having compassion on the widow of Nain when he restores her only son to life (Lk 7:13). Another aspect of jesus' compassion is the space that he allows for the ill to communicate their needs. In Luke 18:41 jesus asks the blind man what he wanted jesus to do for him. jesus' attitude of healing the ear of the high priest's slave which had been cut off (as well as his accompanying warning, 'No more of this!', to his followers) can be interpreted as being an act of compassion (Lk 22:50, 51), taking into consideration the fact that a similar meaning is connoted in the parable of the good Samaritan for response to an act of assault. jesus' response to the crowds is said to be one of compassion in Matthew 10:36.

Compassion can also be said to be at the root of the inclusive nature of jesus' healings. There is a strong element of resistance to exclusion in jesus' healing stories. The anti-exclusionary stance of jesus comes out clearly in the different categories of people he healed. A majority of them were people who are likely to have been marginalized by purity concerns like the lepers and the haemorrhaging woman. There are people with 'marginal identity', gentiles, and people considered to be of inferior worth. jesus heals people from Gadarenes (Mt 8:28), the daughter of a synagogue leader (Mt 9:18; Mk 5:22 ff), the daughter of a Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24 ff)/Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21 ff), a Samaritan leper (Lk 17:16), and a slave of a centurion of Capernaum (Mt 8:5 ff). There are people who also belong to the 'upper class' – jairus is the ruler of a synagogue, and the centurion of Capernaum who approaches jesus to heal his slave. Hence, we can state that there is an inclusive character to jesus' healings. I place this inclusive nature of jesus' healings under the theme of compassion because we find a focus on

disvalued states of the ill irrespective of their identity. Also, one should understand that compassion which is selective can never be true compassion. What comes through this motif of inclusiveness is jesus' concern for humanity where it is most threatened.

Mercy and Compassion are other features which have jesus transcending boundaries. They denote the affective aspect of praxis where one is moved to act. A praxis-oriented understanding of compassion/mercy as it appears in the healing stories warrants consideration of two points – the inclusive and universal nature of jesus' compassion and the subordination of Law to human need. Both features encompass a great deal of radicalism; especially in a context where boundary reinforcement thrived on the basis of stringent exclusivism validated by the Law. One can cognitively identify compassion as a feature that also inheres in the universality and inclusiveness which characterize jesus' healings. Hence, this feature of compassion can also be studied with the feature of conflict and confrontation because, in the healings where jesus breaks the rules, jesus' relativization of the law is extraordinarily radical in the sense it subordinates every institution to human need. jesus is shown to be in conflict with the religious leaders 'whose casuistic interpretation of the Law and whose thoroughly legalistic understanding of religion he opposes vigorously'.[24] The interpenetrating nature of compassion and conflict especially with regard to jesus' acts of healing is brought out in Mark 3:1 ff. where before jesus goes on to heal the man with the withered hand on the Sabbath, he questions the onlookers whether it was appropriate to do good or harm on the Sabbath. The silence of the crowd both angers and grieves jesus. 'But they were silent. And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart.' (Mark 3:5)

jesus' compassion when understood as inter-human concern brings out the challenges such compassion would have entailed. There can be little doubt that the 'radicalism of jesus who brushed aside the letter of the Law in order to grasp its spirit (radical obedience to God shown by radical concern for the neighbour) would have collided head on with the rigorism of the sects'.[25] Further, in a context of rigorous exclusivism we can join Soares-Prabhu in saying that:

> (t)he universalism of jesus with its sympathy for the outcasts within jewish society and its openness to Samaritans and gentiles outside it, would have clashed with the particularism of the jewish groups, whose bigoted insistence on the strict observance of the Law turned them into closed elitist or fanatical communities, which excluded from their fellowship not only gentiles but even jews who failed to live up to their own exacting standards.[26]

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24 Soares-Prabhu, 'jesus and Conflict', p.164.

25 Soares-Prabhu, 'jesus and Conflict', p. 167.

26 Soares-Prabhu, 'jesus and Conflict', p. 167.

Thus, we can understand j esus' compassion to be manifest in his anti-exclusionary stand and we can understand that such compassion was also manifest as conflict and confrontation. The radical nature of the compassion of j esus can be seen in his violation of the social codes of exclusion. The inclusive nature of the healings proclaim the unconditional and non-discriminatory nature of God's love. j esus' willingness to cross boundaries to touch and cleanse and eat with the outcast ones ushered in life and hope where there was none. It was a threatening willingness which sought to rock the very foundations of the whole religious and cultural and political system by which life is ordered. It was j esus' concern for these marginal people that made him a matter of concern to those who are in charge.[27] Soares-Prabhu goes on to talk of j esus' '*Dharma* of Concern' which is related to the concept of compassion. By *Dharma*, Prabhu means the complex of religious insight and ethical concern which determined the lifestyle that j esus followed. *Agape* approximates Prabhu' understanding of j esus' ethical concern. 'Concern for the neighbour is central to the *Dharma* of j esus.'[28] Such concern takes on a radical pertinence as it is absolutely *universal*, wholly gratuitous. For Prabhu, this *Dharma* of concern is 'as *unconditional* as the love of the Father from which it ultimately derives'.[29] It emulates the love of the father and is an *affective* concern, responding affectively (as the father's love does) to human need.[30] Responsiveness and sensitivity to human need signify compassion. Thus, in the compassion of j esus, we can see the interplay of the features of compassion, conflict and pedagogy. It brings out the complementary nature of all the three factors. Thus, if we understand praxis here as emulative action (emulating j esus), we need to recognize that conflict and compassion go together in contexts where praxis involves subversion of boundary- reinforcing structures.

Conclusion

The aspect of 'following' Christ has been a normative factor which has characterized Christian discipleship. Following Christ implies emulative action. j on Sobrino's understanding of 'following' makes clear how it is understood in the Latin American context as an 'existential, praxic expression of faith' which must be historicized.[31] In a simple manner, Sobrino describes what it means to follow Christ:

27 j uel, *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 73.
28 Soares-Prabhu, 'j esus and Conflict', p. 167.
29 Soares-Prabhu, 'j esus and Conflict', p. 167.
30 Soares-Prabhu, 'j esus and Conflict', p. 167.
31 Sobrino, 'Systematic', pp. 132–3.

> After all, following means doing, in terms of the present, what Jesus did, and doing it in the way that he did it. It means the mission of building the Reign with the attitude and spirit of Jesus. In this praxis a kinship is acquired – greater or lesser, obviously – with Jesus, and this praxis (like all praxis) explains one's antecedent concept of Jesus, his mission and his spirit.
>
> On the other hand, our praxis, like that of Jesus, is also subject to the vagaries of history. That is, although its horizon is the ultimate, its concretions are not, and depending on how these come to be, the same praxis can be the verification or temptation for faith itself.[32]

Praxis bears evidence of the content and nature of Christian faith. It is the action which consciously reincarnates the actions of Jesus in a relevant manner for one's context. 'Following', for Sobrino, also 'stands in essential relationship with the building of the reign of God and the destruction of the anti-Reign'.[33] Thus, there is an intrinsically ethical component to following. Understanding praxis as emulative action, i.e. emulation of Christic praxis, gives it a bipolar ethical imperative which offers a challenge for both the 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed' to re-orient their lives and praxis in conformity with Christic praxis. Taking the synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology opens up the scope for emulative action because Jesus is the locus in the synoptic healing stories and his actions become the guiding paradigm for ours. Of the four ethical principles delineated so far, three features, namely touch as defiance of purity codes, compassion and conflict/confrontational argument, have an emulative component applicable to the 'non-dalit church' primarily. They act as signposts in deriving ethical principles for resisting any discrimination based on purity and pollution in the Indian caste context. Hence, positing the synoptic healing stories as the alternative paradigm for Dalit theology offers possibility of widening the applicability of Dalit Theology to the people belonging to non-Dalit castes as well as the 'oppressors' of Dalits. By comparative reference to the praxis of Jesus, the 'oppressors' also can change their attitude towards marginalization and oppression of Dalits. This emulative aspect of praxis will imply that the oppressors understand that for Jesus purity was an inclusive force rather than an exclusive force. Jesus countered purity regulations when they subordinated compassion. When purity concerns threatened to alienate and segregate people he resisted them and posited alternative forms by way of which holiness, which was understood as a prerequisite for relating with God, was modified in a manner which created new possibilities for human social interaction and relation. The other ethical principle, faith, is more applicable to the Dalits and offers up space for reflecting upon the agential status of the 'victims'. It is a feature which can be understood as the resistive strategy of the Dalits.

If one adopts a systemic view of praxis, one perceives a need for all the ethical principles discussed above – faith as participatory action, compassion and conflict

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32 Sobrino, 'Systematic', p. 135.

33 Sobrino, 'Systematic', p. 133.

as justice, and confrontation and defiance as critical impugnation of oppressive ideology. The complementary nature of these three features for any praxis should be recognized. The definition of praxis given below brings out the interactive pattern of praxis in which faith, compassion, critical confrontation are actively important:

> Although the (Liberation) theologians define praxis in various ways, a commonly agreed upon definition is, 'transformative activity motivated by love and guided by faith'. The faith dimension sets it apart from materialist notions and at the same time gives praxis an eschatological quality. As a consequence, praxis, guided by faith, directs itself toward the reign of God as its ultimate end and moral standard. As a positive guide, faith illumines who the neighbour is, inspires persons to love compassionately and efficaciously, and moves them to work for justice in solidarity with the poor. As a negative guide, faith criticizes all types of praxis that are self-focussed or too narrowly focussed and ideologies that obstruct the pathway to justice and solidarity.[34]

In the light of all the features we have identified and analysed, one can say that they all constitute the very process of praxis as defined above. They seem to be in conformity with Ambedkar's dictum: 'Educate, organize and agitate'. This is because, while jesus' confrontations which have a concomitant pedagogical content can be linked to 'educating', the principles of faith and compassion can be linked to organizing and agitating. Therefore, in conclusion we can say that the synoptic healing stories enable Dalit theology to use the rhetoric of ethical imperative in relation to both the Dalits and the non Dalits that makes them consciously reject their manifold psychological enslavements and gives them the necessary impetus to work towards emancipation – be it of the self or the 'other'.

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[34] Thomas L. Schubeck, *Liberation Ethics: Sources, Models and Norms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 83.

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Reading for Liberation

Some Hermeneutical Confessions

Having so far argued on a general basis for the relevance of appropriating the synoptic healing stories to address the issue of caste-based discrimination, we move over to focus on how the synoptic healing stories can facilitate a methodological revision of certain salient features of Dalit theology which have a bearing on the practical efficacy of Dalit theology. Such methodological revision is pivotal if Dalit theology is to reinvent itself as a much more effective theology of liberation. The next three chapters explore the possibility of deriving impetuses on the basis of which three important areas of Dalit theology can be rethought. These three areas, which emerged as problematic areas requiring revisiting in our critical analysis of Dalit theology undertaken in the second chapter, are: the problem of efficacious Christology, the question of Dalit agency and resistance, and the issue of praxiological partnerships.

There will also be a necessary methodological shift at this stage of the book. We will be focusing on individual synoptic healing stories rather than on the entire generic breadth of the synoptic healing stories. This is done primarily for reasons of manageability and focus. Such focus on pertinent passages in the light of specific issues relating to the methodology of Dalit theology help us to illuminate the specific nature of the problem as well as to derive concrete analogies for social practice. However, as a principle, the selected passages will be those which appear in more than one healing story.

As a rule, I will follow the liberationists' way of reading the scriptures, which implies that my engagement with the synoptic healing stories will be committed and partisan. I agree with Arul Raja for whom 'all (our) attempts at a Dalit hermeneutics of the Bible could be genuine only when our solidarity with the Dalits enthuse them to decide on their own, to fight a pitched battle with relentless hope, till the end, against all the forces upholding the caste hierarchy'.[1] This will be the perspective from which I will be reading the selected texts. The point of departure for my hermeneutics will be my own commitment to the cause of liberation of the Dalits. *Commitment* assumes priority over *understanding*. A hermeneutical spiral is envisaged. The primacy of committed engagement is 'the point of insertion into the hermeneutical spiral, the place from which the effort to deepen understanding

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[1] Maria Arul Raja, 'Some Reflections on a Dalit Reading of the Bible', in V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi/Madras: ISPCK/GLTCRI, 1997) (pp. 336–45), p. 344.

and improve faithful practice begins'.[2] This commitment to deepen praxis enables me to be open to the possibility of altering received interpretations of the Bible,[3] so that the Bible speaks anew in the Dalit situation.

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[2] Duncan B. Forrester, *Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), p. 29.

[3] Forrester, *Truthful Action*, p. 29.

Chapter 5
Revisiting Dalit Christology

One of the important methodological revisions required for Dalit theology is the re-conceptualization of Dalit Christology. We have already pointed out that the present epistemological premise of pathos under which Dalit Theology has worked out its Christology leaves insufficient space for critical praxis. Dalit theology doesn't offer the necessary Christic impetus which will make involvement in transformation a pragmatic possibility. Following our analysis of Dalit theology we concluded that Dalit Christology had the potential to operate as a palliative inuring the Dalits to their existing suffering through marginalization and make the Dalits masochistic in their attitude towards suffering. Paradigms which inordinately and exclusively focus on pathos can reinforce the slavish mentality and deeply inculcated sense of inferiority among the Dalits, which Dalit theologians like Massey and Azariah and Dalit leaders like Ambedkar have pointed out to be the one overarching reason impeding Dalit initiative in accepting responsibility for self-transformation and the positive realization of their inherent worth and dignity. Thus, if one uses the rhetoric of ethical imperative in relation to the Dalits then it should mean an imperative that makes them consciously reject their psychological enslavement and gives them impetus to work towards self-emancipation.

Making the synoptic healings as the alternative paradigm for our constructive purpose allows sufficiently for this ethical impetus for the Dalits because primarily it opens up scope for articulating a Christological paradigm of resistance, and protest. Jesus Christ in the synoptic healing stories emerges as one who is in the words of Riches, a 'significant agent of cultural and social change' who 'enabled the poor and the oppressed to find a voice and a purpose and a vision of a new world to live and die for'.[1] Emulation of the praxis of Jesus is the primary manner through which most Christians practise their faith as Christians and so here in the situation of the caste-based discrimination against the Dalits the paradigm of Jesus the healer which emerges in the story of the healing of the leper is one which makes it clear that social segregation on the basis of notions of pure and impure was wrong and needed to be resisted. For anyone who passively accepted such discrimination it would imply tacit complicity in a sinful structure and a contradiction of the examples set by Jesus.

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[1] Riches, 'Biblical', pp. 269–70.

Reading for Dalit Liberation

Having identified four praxiological features namely touch (defiance of uncleanness), faith, compassion and conflict/confrontation, we now move on to study the story of the healing of the leper found in all three synoptic gospels. We will initially analyse the correspondence of the four ethical values to the two oppositional motifs: boundary-reinforcement and boundary-transcendence. We will delineate the practical pertinence of the principles of faith, compassion and conflict/confrontation in a context governed by regulations imposed by the notions of purity and pollution and draw out implications for a Dalit Christology of liberation.

I consider this passage as being representative of the passages dealing with extreme forms of impurity namely, leprosy, menstruation and corpse-defilement. There are a few convergent trajectories which make hermeneutical appropriation of the biblical text for the Indian context possible. Two need specific mention. They are: firstly lepers as well as the Dalits are marginalized on the grounds of impurity, and secondly religious codes are the foundations which legitimate this marginalization. As we have already seen, the Levitical law in Leviticus 13:45 prescribes that lepers had to 'wear torn clothes, leave the hair disheveled, cover the upper lip and cry "unclean, unclean" and live outside the camp'. In a similar manner, the *Manusmriti* prescribes that the *candalas* (Dalits) must reside out of the village and wear clothing of the deceased. Faxian, a Chinese traveler, also mentions that a *candala* must sound an alarm by striking a piece of wood as a warning when entering a city.[2] The primary focus of our interpretation of this story would be to glean principles which will enable a practical engagement for liberation.

The Story as a Story of Multiple Boundary Crossings

This story as we understand it is a story of healing of a 'leper'. The so-called 'leper' is the embodiment of uncleanness and contagion and was thus likely to have been stigmatized. 'The "sickness" described in the Old Testament as leprosy is simply not leprosy at all from a biomedical perspective. But from the socio – cultural perspective – which is what the Bible always reports – this condition called leprosy threatens communal integrity and holiness and must be removed from the community'.[3] Crossan helps us to understand how leprosy posed a threat to a socio-cultural world governed by strict symbolic boundary maintenance:

> leprosy raises an even more dangerous boundary problem. The standard bodily orifices can be clearly delineated and their incomings and outgoings categorized as clean or unclean. And that establishes, as it was meant to do, an intense

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[2] Yamazaki, 'Social Discrimination', p. 14.

[3] Pilch, 'Healing in Mark: A Social Science Analysis', in *BTB*, Vol. 15, 1989 (pp. 142–50), p. 142.

> concentration on boundary establishment. When, however would-be orifices start to appear where no orifices are meant to be, then, unable to tell orifices from surface or with all boundaries rendered porous, the entire system breaks down. That is why biblical leprosy applies not only to *skin*, as in Leviticus 13:1–15 and 14:1–32, but to *clothes*, as in 13:40–59, and to house *walls*, as in 13:33–53, and it renders each surface ritually unclean – that is, socially inappropriate. The leprous person is not a social threat because of medical contagion, threatening infection or epidemic, as we might imagine, but because of symbolic contamination, threatening in microcosm the very identity, integrity, and security of society at large.[4]

On the basis of these insights we can understand the story in relation to the motif of boundary crossing as an interplay of several boundary-stressing and boundary-crossing elements.

We can identify an implicit boundary-stressing motif in the very identity of the man. The man is iconic of the 'semiotics of contagion' and is a perceived threat to the symbolic order. As such he is the very embodiment of the boundary-stressing motif. There is evidence in 2 Kings 5:7 to suggest that disease was often associated with divine punishment for human sin.[5] Given that there is a connotation of sin attached to disease in the j ewish world of j esus or within the wider Graeco-Roman world, connections can also be made to the theory of *Karma* which sustains the caste-discrimination in the Indian context. Lott, commenting on the healing of the leper, makes interesting connections with the doctrine of *Karma*, which considers disease as a curse from God in the sense of a retribution for some past heinous deed.[6] From this perspective, Lott interprets, in an insightful manner, the leper's important question about the willingness of j esus to heal him:

> No wonder this leper was shouting for help from a point at some distance from j esus. It was the law of God that compelled him to keep his distance from every one else. Alienated from his community he was expected to live along with the other untouchables/diseased as he was. No wonder, too, this leper had such doubt about j esus' *willingness* to heal him. Was he not cursed by God? What confidence could he have that j esus would want anything to do with him? The great wonder is this leper had come to believe that somehow the wandering healer, the holy man who taught about God's new reign breaking into our lives *could* cure him if only he *would*. He did not doubt the power of j esus but he only doubted his *will* to do so. Would j esus *want* to?[7]

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4 Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 79.

5 Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), p. 103.

6 Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 41.

7 Lott, *Healing Wings*, pp. 41, 42. Emphasis mine

I understand that such a reading of the text would provoke much debate. However, it widens the perspective for us to understand the *faith* of the leper. The insights from this reading help us to understand the boundary reinforced within the psyche of the leper. Taken either as a frustrated challenge or a meek hesitant plea, the struggle within the leper's psyche is plausible considering the stringency of the rules of purity and pollution which governed social life. This perspective also aids us to perceive the implicit manner in which boundary reinforcement occurs in the story. The boundary-reinforcement motif is present both socially and psychologically in the story.

We can find boundary-transcendence happening at several points in the story. jesus transcends boundaries through his touch and pronouncement of cleansing. Delving into a deeper examination of jesus' healing activity, we need to understand that the purity regulations regarding leprosy maintain that the disease is communicable, and a priest must be the one who presides over the ritual cleansing of the affected persons.[8] jesus is portrayed as challenging both these regulations. 'First, jesus touches the leper in the process of healing. Touch here becomes more than "physical", because it is firmly co-opted into the symbolics of contagion. According to the symbolic order jesus should have become unclean through contagion, but rather in what seems to be a "subversion of this symbolic order" the leper is the one who becomes clean according to Mark.'[9] Healing through touch is one of the regular features of jesus' healing actions. It becomes an act of nonchalant defiance of the existing purity codes and should seldom be interpreted without reference to the purity codes. Second, jesus does not merely 'cleanse' the leper but he 'declares him clean'. This becomes clear by the repeated use of the verb *Katharizein*. From our analysis of the Levitical regulations on leprosy, it is clear that this action of cleansing is solely a priestly prerogative. Here jesus can be described as acting in daring defiance of the Torah.[10]

jesus also transcends boundaries through his command of confrontational witness to the leper. The aftermath of the leper's healing involves the instruction of jesus to the leper. In Mark 1: 44 jesus says to the healed man, 'See that you say nothing to anyone … but go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your cleansing which Moses commanded, as evidence to them'. We should take note of the change in the object from 'priest' to 'them'. jesus' instructions to the healed man seem to be a deliberate attempt by jesus to confront the ideological hegemony. The change in object from 'priest' to 'them' does suggest a protest against not merely an individual but a whole ideological regulative system; a

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8 Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 152 ff.

9 Fernando Belo, *A Materialist Reading of the Gospel of Mark* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1981), p. 106.

10 C.H. Cave, 'The Leper: Mark 1:40–45', in *NTS*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 1979 (pp. 245–9), pp. 246 ff.

protest against 'the entire purity apparatus' controlled by the priests.[11] Myers prefers the translation of the Greek phrase *eis marturion autois* as 'witnessing against them' and points out that it is a technical phrase frequently employed for bearing testimony before hostile audiences as found in Mark 6:11 and 13:9.[12] Crossan also argues that a more appropriate way of understanding the phrase 'as a testimony to them' is to translate this phrase as a 'witness against them'.[13] This will help make clear that the transmissional injunction to go to the priest was intended not to portray j esus' legal observance but to identify the leper as 'confrontational witness'.[14] The leper stands as a confrontational witness in defiance to the priestly prerogative of cleansing leprosy. He is the 'embodiment' of the subversion of symbolic order that j esus' act of healing had triggered.

Boundary transcendence can also be discerned in j esus' anger which is manifest in the story. Three Greek words (*orgistheis*, *embrimesamenos* and *exebalen*), which are suggestive of agitation, can be found in the story, in relation to j esus' response of healing to the leper, much to the perplexity of the reader. The first of these, *orgistheis*, means that j esus was moved with *anger*. A majority of the translations tend to replace this with another word, *splagxvistheis*, which connotes *pity* or *compassion*.[15] However, *orgistheis* seems more probable because it is in conformity with the picture of j esus, especially the images which appear in Mark 3:5 and 10:14.[16] It also makes the use of *embrimesamenos* and *exebelen* in the text intelligible. The word *embrimesamenos* used after the declaration of wholeness can be translated as 'snorting with indignation' and the last word of the trio, *exebalen*, could be translated as 'dispatches'.[17] Some use the word 'drive'.[18] All those arguing for the probability of *orgistheis* point out that it even helps make sense of the negative reading of *eis martution autois* (a witness *against* them).[19] One postulation to understand the agitated escalation of j esus' emotions is to understand this anger as being directed not against the leper but against the system which victimized him. Some have understood j esus' anger to be provoked by the 'inhuman state to which the leper had been reduced'.[20] An image of an 'enraged j esus' emerges from the story.

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11 Myers, *Binding*, p. 153.

12 Myers, *Binding*, p. 153.

13 Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 83.

14 Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 83.

15 Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark* (London: A & C Black, 1991), pp. 79 ff.

16 Sam P. Mathew, 'j esus and Purity System in Mark's Gospel', in *Indian Journal of Theology (IJT)*, Vol. 42, No. 2, September 2000 (pp. 101–10), p. 103.

17 Myers, *Binding*, pp. 153 ff.

18 Hooker, *The Gospel According to Mark*, pp. 80, 81.

19 Mathew, 'j esus', p. 104.

20 Lott, *Healing Wings*, p. 43.

It is not only j esus who crosses boundaries in the story but also the leper, if we consider the '*faith*' of the leper manifested as *initiative* in the narrative as subversive boundary crossing. This element of *faith* though not explicit is to be assumed, taking into consideration the stringency relating to the law regarding lepers. In approaching j esus the leper transgresses the purity regulations. This is where the leper's action can be understood as '*faith*'. The leper takes the initiative for the healing and, even if the anger of j esus is considered to be directed towards the leper's impunity in approaching him, it needs to be acknowledged as '*faith*' translated as overcoming obstacles, the obstacles here being the purity regulations. From this dimension the leper's actions can be considered as a serious breach of behaviour in a culture which was conditioned by these purity regulations, the conclusive stringency of which Oppenheimer highlights in the following manner:

> The great strictness characterizing matters of ritual purity and impurity, the difficulty of complying with it, the danger of transferring ritual impurity from one person to another, all this led to a situation whereby ritual impurity became the guiding principle in the division of j ewish society into classes.[21]

Understood in the light of this comment, the leper's challenge to j esus that he could heal him only if he wanted to is indicative of the apparent desperation which drove the man to violate the social codes and approach j esus. The leper's initiative is a model in which we can see 'pathos' leading to 'praxis'. Hence, it assumes pertinence for Dalit theology.

Impulses for a Liberative Dalit Christology

In order to understand j esus' actions as redemptive praxis we need to understand the difference between healing and cure and disease and illness. Arthur Kleinman makes the distinction between disease and illness clear:

> *Disease* refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term *illness* refers to the psychological experience and meaning of perceived disease. Illness includes secondary personal and social responses to the primary malfunctioning (disease) in the individual's physiological or psychological status (or both) … from this perspective, illness is the shaping of disease into behavior and experience. It is created by personal, social, and cultural reactions to disease.[22]

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[21] A'haron Oppenheimer, *The 'Am Ha-aretz: A Study in the Social History of the Jewish People in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), p. 18. Cited in Myers, *Binding*, p. 75.

[22] Arthur Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland Between Anthropologies, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, in the series

Having understood the dichotomy between two aspects of sickness, namely disease and illness, we need to understand the differences between *healing* and *cure*. 'Cure' involves a form of aetiological therapy that takes 'effective control of a disordered biological and/or psychosocial process usually identified as a *disease*'. *Healing* involves a symptomatic therapy where a new meaning is created for the sufferer. *Healing* is 'a process by which (a) disease and certain other worrisome circumstances are made into illness (a cultural construction and therefore meaningful), and (b) the sufferer gains a degree of satisfaction through the reduction, or even the elimination of the psychological, sensory, and experiential oppressiveness engendered by his (sic) medical circumstances'.[23]

In the present story, illness characterizes the stigma, isolation, marginalization and sense of inferior worth felt by the leper. In the case of the leper, we can say that though j esus may not have necessarily *cured* the disease through a medical intervention in the physical world, he nevertheless *healed* it through a symbolic intervention in the social world. All this may look like a threat to the 'miraculous' content of the healing. Crossan helps us to understand how we can make sense of the healing stories without necessarily emphasizing the 'miraculous':

> Miracles are not changes in the physical world so much as changes in the social world, and it is society that dictates in any case, how we see, use, and explain that physical world. It would, of course, be nice to have certain miracles available to change the physical world if we could, but it would be much more desirable to make certain changes in the social one, which we can. We ourselves can already make the physical world totally uninhabitable; the question is whether we can make the social world humanly habitable.[24]

j esus' praxis takes the form of ideological confrontation, which threatens the very foundation on which the existing social order is based. This was a symbolic order whereby the physically 'un-whole' were relegated to second-class citizenship. j esus says no to the system of valuation and resists the 'logic of the status quo'.[25] His alternative consciousness is at radical variance with the dominant consciousness of his culture and thus threatens to destabilize the present 'order'.[26] The healing was affected by j esus' refusal to accept the ritual uncleanness and social ostracism associated with the disease. Analysing this healing against the background of the body politic, the praxis of j esus can be interpreted as quite deliberately impugning the rights and prerogatives of society's boundary keepers

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Comparative Studies of Health System and Medical Care (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 72.

23 Kleinman, *Patients and Healers*, p. 265.

24 Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 82.

25 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 204.

26 Marcus j . Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, 1987), p. 183.

and controllers. We see j esus functioning as an 'alternative boundary keeper in a way subversive to the established procedures of his society'.[27] The whole episode can now be understood as the articulation of j esus' resistance to the notions of purity which governed and shaped the symbolic order.

The image of j esus which emerges from the story can contribute to a more efficacious Dalit Christology. The image of j esus which emerges in the story is an image of j esus who is enraged at the oppressive forces which marginalize the man and is at variance from the popular understanding of Christ as someone 'sweet, soft and humble'.[28] Understanding Christ as someone who can never get angry even in contexts of injustice and oppression makes us 'lose our sensitivity to the problems that confront us'. While the portrait of an angry and agitated j esus challenges the powerful and ruling class, 'the picture of a compassionate j esus is always harmless and safe'.[29] The image of j esus which emerges from the story is at variance with the pictures of j esus that have been preferred in Dalit theology and has potential to influence praxis. It is an image which has emphasis on solidarity as well as on partnership between j esus and the leper, which engages in resistance and protest to the extent of subverting the social codes and creating an alternative social order. j esus' subversive praxis in the story, made manifest specifically through his *touching* of the leper and his '*usurpation' of the priestly prerogative* to declare the leper clean, brings to the fore his 'political activity', which 'seeks attention with the help of legitimating and delegitimating political symbolic actions.'[30]

The Christological image which emerges from the story has more in resonance with the incipient urge for resistance and protest found among Dalit communities than the traditional Dalit Christological image of the suffering Christ. Dalit communitarian life and culture is rife with various expressions of such protest, which unfortunately haven't been considered as a valid epistemological premise for the articulation of Dalit Christology. It would be worthwhile to briefly analyse one of those expressions in order to understand the incipient, subtle and inchoate nature of Dalit protest, which constitutes an important aspect of Dalit subjectivity.

Here I propose to utilize Dalit mythography as a representation of Dalit resistance because Dalit mythography holds in dialectic tension the autonomy of Dalit expression as well as Dalit subjectivity in a highly constrained life situation – a tension which is symptomatic of the subalternity of the Dalits. In the Dalit communities, myths are employed to creatively and corporately re-imagine the collective identity of the Dalit communities. Through this process Dalits often

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[27] Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 82.

[28] Mathew, 'j esus', p. 106.

[29] Mathew, 'j esus', p. 106.

[30] Gerd Theissen, 'The Political Dimension of j esus' Activities', in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce j. Malina and Gerd Theissen (eds), *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) (pp. 225–50), p. 244.

subversively revalidate dominant world-views of their identity which ascribe an inferior status to them.

Pauline Kolenda, in her study of the untouchable sweepers in North India, brings out how their myths of origin reflect a refusal to accept the doctrine of *Karma* that maintains that being born as a Dalit is the result of one's actions in a previous birth. If the Dalits/Untouchable sweepers applied the karmic explanation to their present low status, they would be admitting that they deserved such a status – that they had been wicked in their past rebirths and so are solely responsible for their birth in an impure caste. This, according to Kolenda, would cause them 'religious anxiety'.[31] However, the Dalits refuse to apply the *Karma* doctrine to their socially ascribed low status. Rather, they make references to collective myths of origin, which maintain that they were once a high caste and 'fell due to a terrible accident motivated by the best of intentions':

> According to one particular myth, the original Dalit was a Brahmin who came upon a cow caught mired in the mud. Intending to help the cow (a meritorious intent), he pulled the cow by its tail. But the cow died and since he had been in contact with a dead cow, a polluting contact – his older brothers outcast him and he became the first 'untouchable'.[32]

We see that this myth functions to protect Dalits from the anxiety of *karmic* explanation. They do not subscribe to the theory of *karma*, which is often used to justify their inferior status. Moreover, this myth also gives them a positive sense of having been once higher. Re-mythologization is a domain of specific meaning making for the Dalits. Through this they tactfully contest the hegemonic outlook of the dominant castes. What is reflected in Dalit myths of origin is their dissent towards doctrines that relegate them to sub-human status. Jesus' actions in the story of the healing of the leper resonate with such expressions of resistance and protest. His actions subvert symbolically the social semiotics of the day. When this subversive dimension informs Dalit Christology there is potential for a praxis which refuses to internalize and accept the status quo, and so there is a broader scope for transformation as it gives a religious impetus to Christian Dalits to move beyond the status quo under the Christological category of the 'resisting Christ'.

Moreover, on the basis of the story one of the social labels under which Jesus can be identified is that of a 'deviant'. Jesus' conscious action of touching the leper can be identified as the praxis of 'achieved deviance' which Jesus achieved through public, overt action which was 'ban-able' in his society.[33] The model of Jesus as

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31 Pauline Kolenda, 'Religious Anxiety and the Hindu Fate', in *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 23, Aspects of Religion in South Asia (June 1964) (pp. 71–81).

32 See S.M. Michael, *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), p. 27.

33 Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, California: Polebridge Press, 1988), p. 62.

deviant is in stark contrast to the meek and passive christological images. This christological image is paradigmatic for Christian Dalits 'who are seeking a way to move from a situation in which jesus has been crafted to serve the interest of pacification to a position in which jesus is transformed into a gestalt that drums up support against the oppressive dictates of religion and for the resistive dimension of the christic presence'.[34] In a situation where Dalit Christians do not have 'the advantage of a radical ideology or a mature political leadership to guide them' and where the church leadership has rarely taken a firm political position publicly,[35] this christological image offers a corrective paradigm.

Further, if we understand jesus' instructions to the leper as an instruction for confrontational witness, from a Dalit perspective we can re-read it as a partnership of empowerment to challenge the 'religious establishment'. jesus, by declaring the leper clean and asking him to communicate the liberative act to the priests enables the leper to confront the priests, with an alternative ideology, in which the authority of the religious laws which sanction the 'untouchability' of lepers is denounced not by jesus but the leper himself, who was once a victim of these laws. As jesus 'snorts with indignation' and dispatches the man to confront the 'system', the implied mood is one of protest and not of co-operation'. The man's task involves helping to confront the system which marginalizes him.[36]

In the process, the powerless leper becomes an agent of praxis, by being empowered to challenge the 'boundary-keepers'. I do not consider it crucial to 'know' whether the leper followed jesus' instructions, because the text makes it clear that the man went unrestrainedly public about the cleansing. This leaves open the possibility of a sense of empowerment which accompanied the restorative act. The praxiological implications that can be derived here are to recognize the importance of equipping the Dalits to confront the structures which sanction their oppression within the Churches and society. Equipping the Dalits with confidence is one of the main lines of action pursued by the Dalit liberation movements.[37] There has been an increased pedagogical emphasis in these initiatives for empowerment, which are sometimes closely related to denouncing the authority of religious codes which sustain the oppression in the minds of the oppressed. For example, pamphlets authored by Dalit thinkers which attempt to criticize and reformulate the Hindu legal texts like the *Dharmashastras* (especially the *Laws of Manu*) are emerging as an important ideological weapon to support transformative action

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[34] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 204.

[35] Matthias, 'Identity Dilemmas Confronting the Dalit Christians', p. 136.

[36] Ched Myers, et al., *'Say to this Mountain: Mark's Story of Discipleship'* (edited by Karen Lattea) (New York: Orbis Books, 1996), p. 18.

[37] jean-Luc Racine and josiane Racine, 'Dalit Identities and The Dialectics of Oppression and Emancipation in a Changing India: The Tamil Case and Beyond', in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1, 1998 (pp. 5–19), p. 11.

among the *Chamars* in Lucknow, North India.[38] The titles of the pamphlets reveal the emphasis on attacking the religious legitimization of oppression. Some of the titles are *Manusmriti: Ek Pratikriya* (Manusmriti: A Reaction) by Premkumar Mani, *Shoshiton Par Dharmin Dakaiti* (Religious Dacoity on the Exploited) by Lalsingh Yadav, *Hindu Sanskriti Main Varna Vyavastha Aur Jati Bhed* (The Varna System and Caste Disrimination in Hindi Culture) by Sundarlal Sagar. What these attempts to empower the Dalits are seeking to do is to create awareness among the Dalits about the dominant religious ideologies which seek to sustain them in their sub-human state. I understand that for the Church to undertake such a line would be sensitive and could result in religious polemic. However, the central issue is to enable a critical consciousness about the hegemonic ideology behind religious regulations which perpetuate differences in human status.

By taking the priestly prerogative of declaring the cleansing of the leper, j esus critically reformulates the religious codes which oppress people. We see this as a deliberate attempt which involved rebuilding a society on the foundations of economic and religious egalitarianism. This needs to be reckoned as a challenge to not only the strictest purity regulations of j udaism, or the Mediterranean's patriarchal combination of patronage and clientele, honour and shame; rather it needs to be perceived as a deliberate attack on civilization's unceasing inclination to draw divisions, invoke boundaries, perpetuate hierarchies and maintain discriminations.[39] It is this example of j esus which becomes paradigmatic for practical involvement in countering discrimination. It is a challenge to which j esus invites the leper. Dalits who have experienced liberation are invited to take on the task of challenging the structures which uphold casteism.

In the Indian context where casteism as a social system divides humans into the 'pure' and the 'polluting', and further denies the Dalits equality and justice in terms of their socio-economic standing and human dignity, j esus' attempts to enable an egalitarian social coexistence through active resistance to the social semiotics of purity and pollution should become paradigmatic. The model of Christic praxis which emerges from the story gives impetus for pragmatically dealing with a system which fosters and nurtures relative deprivation of the worst genre. Therefore, in conclusion we can say that this story helps us to construe praxiological principles, applicable to the Dalit context of discrimination based on purity and pollution, which can be derived based on the following models through which various boundaries are transcended in the story:

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[38] Michael B. Schwartz, 'Indian Untouchable Texts of Resistance: Symbolic Domination and Historical Knowledge', in H.L. Seneviratne (ed.), *Identity, Consciousness and the Past: Forging of Caste and Community in India and Sri Lanka* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) (pp. 177–91), pp. 178, 179.

[39] j ohn Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), p. xii.

a. The model of the leper who transcends the boundary of inferior self worth which the dominant religious system has reinforced within him. From the perspective of the oppressed Dalits the initiative and participation of the leper for self liberation assumes paramount importance. The principle of 'faith as initiative', which the leper embodies, opens new frontiers for Dalit praxis which are affirmative of the agency of the oppressed in self-liberation.
b. The subversive model of j esus, who through his compassion/anger, and touch refutes the boundary which demarcates the unclean from the clean. Through 'touch' the boundaries are themselves challenged and redrawn.
c. The models of compassion and resistance embodied by j esus are applicable as emulative praxis to not only the victims but the victimizers as well. Through an embodiment of the ethical principles which can be discerned from j esus' own response to discrimination: namely compassion (working in solidarity with the victims and their attempts for self-emancipation), and critical-subversive confrontation (confronting the ideological structures which reinforce discrimination and subverting them to extend human worth) – Christian praxis can become a critical, corrective and constructive enterprise.

Chapter 6
Rethinking Agency, Re-signifying Resistance

In this chapter I will analyse an exorcism narrative with a focus on the issue of resistance. In this story Jesus exorcises a man who is possessed by a demon identified as Legion. Though the selected exorcism account appears in slightly different forms in all the three synoptic gospels (Matthew 8:28–33, Mark 5:1–20 and Luke 8:26–39), I will focus predominantly on the Markan version of the exorcism in this chapter. Similarities exist between the Markan and the Lucan texts, except that Mark additionally identifies the area as the Decapolis (ten cities). Matthew differs from both Mark and Luke. There is no mention of 'Legion' in the comparatively shorter and less vivid Matthean version of the exorcism, where two demoniacs are mentioned and the country of the Gadarenes is identified as the locale for the exorcism. The story helps us to focus on the issues of Dalit agency and resistance, both of which are related to the *form* of Dalit praxis. It especially helps us to illuminate the Dalit context of resistance and engage with issues which are of relevance to Dalit theology and praxis, like a) the role of symbolic resistance in Dalit struggles and the issue of *translation of 'symbolic resistance' to pragmatic political action*, b) the issue of 'collaboration' and 'collusion' with the oppressors, which is a big impediment for Dalit emancipation, and c) opposition to the assertive and resistive strategies of the Dalits.

Understanding the Text: the Imperial, Imperious and the Impervious in the Text

The Imperial Presence as the Symbolic Imperious – the Context of Roman Occupation

The story is an idiomatic integration of the cosmic and the socio-political dimensions of the conflict between the forces of the dominant and the resistant as well as of good and evil. We have to pay attention to the socio-political implications of this exorcism in its first-century Palestine context. One cannot underestimate the influence of Roman occupation on Palestine, especially the Decapolis area (ten cities), which functions as the context of the story.[1] Both Mark's and Luke's choice of Gerasenes as the site of the symbolic confrontation and subjugation of the 'Legion' accentuate the political connotations of the story. Josephus reports of

[1] For more, see W. Wink, *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 45.

Vespasin despatching Lucius Annius with a cavalry and a division of foot soldiers to Gerasa who captured the town, massacred a thousand young men, ransacked the region, captured families and ultimately torched the houses.[2] Placing this story in the region of Decapolis could thus have made significant sense to the Markan audience. Encoded cryptically in the story is also the implication of freedom from Roman rule.[3] There are many military overtones in the story suggestive of connotations with the occupying Roman military.[4] The term Legion signifies a specific meaning in the context.[5] The reference to Legion fits with the 'metaphor of occupied territory overrun by a power which brutally plunders and oppresses the original inhabitants … refers us to enemy occupation and associates Roman law and order with the power of Satan'.[6]

On the basis of the textual evidence, I agree with Hollenbach in categorizing the demoniac under the '*lumpenproletariat*' – commoners who resented their situation of hopelessness and marginalization.[7] The connection between demoniac possession and colonial oppression has been pointed out.[8] Hollenbach points out how in the situation of Roman Palestine mental illnesses could be seen 'as a socially acceptable form of oblique protest against, or escape from oppressions', as such mental disorders were both therapeutic and symptomatic of social conflict.[9] Hollenbach suggests the possibility that Palestinian possessions may have performed a similar function and occurred within a similar social and political pattern ' ... as a "fix" for people who saw no other way to cope with the horrendous social and political conditions in which they found their lot cast'.[10]

From a socio-literary perspective we can see the demoniac as the textual representative of the 'collective anxiety over Roman imperialism'.[11] Though at that time popular resistance in the form of social banditry assumed the expression of the common people's sense of justice,[12] the mode of resistance of this man seems to be one of retreat into an inner symbolic world. The reasons for this could probably be frustration over the increasing failure of resistance, self-defeatism and fatalistic acceptance of the power of the occupiers and the fear of recrimination.

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2 josephus, *War*, IV, ix,1. Cited in Myers, *Binding*, p. 191.

3 Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 256.

4 Richard Dormandy, 'The Expulsion of Legion: A Political Reading of Mark 5:1–20', in *ExpTim*, Vol. III, No. 10, 2000 (pp. 335–7), p. 335.

5 Myers, *Binding*, p. 191.

6 Francis Watson, *Text, Church and World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 249.

7 P.W. Hollenbach, 'jesus, Demoniacs and Public Authorities: A Socio-historical Study', in *JAAR*, Vol. 49, 1982 (pp. 567–88), p. 573.

8 Crossan, *Jesus*, pp. 88–91.

9 Hollenbach, 'jesus, Demoniacs', p. 576.

10 Hollenbach, 'jesus, Demoniacs', p. 576.

11 Myers, *Binding*, p. 193.

12 Richard A. Horsely, 'Ancient jewish Banditry and the Revolt against Rome, A.D. 66–70', in *CBQ*, Vol. 43, 1981 (pp. 409–32), pp. 416 ff.

A series of failed rebellions reinforced the sense of powerlessness of the people.[13] It is probably this sense of powerlessness, which is symbolically represented by the futile attempts to bind the demon, which is addressed by Mark. Thus, we can say that the man represents the cathartic response of the subjugated, which, in order to avoid recrimination, could only be articulated in a symbolic world. The projection of the man in this story also seems to be symbolically encoded. Though jewish, he lived among tombs which were places of uncleanness.[14] The encoded symbolism may be suggestive of the way jewish land had been considered to be defiled by the gentile presence of the occupiers. Also there could be a link to Herod Antipas' coercion of the jews to inhabit Tiberias, which was considered unclean as it had been built on the site of a graveyard.[15] Drawing attention to the socio-literary functions of the miracle stories, Myers calls the exorcism 'public symbolic action'.[16] The destruction of the swine can be understood as the symbolic destruction of the hegemonic Roman rule. Crossan understands the drowning of the pigs as a 'brief performancial summary' of the dream of every jewish resister.[17] In a context of foreign occupation and severe oppression, Mark portrays a christological image of jesus as the source of liberation and hope who symbolically ushers in an alternative social structure.

We have to be cautious about claiming that the exorcism should be understood exclusively as political repudiation. The christological framework in which these exorcisms are worked out cannot be neglected. jesus' divinity was understood and interpreted in terms of a cosmic conflict. That the 'human' face of the cosmic conflict could have been understood as contemporary historical conditions, though speculative, seems probable. The point of departure for our interpretation would be to accept that the central motif of the story is the destruction of the 'oppressive powers'. The real encounter of jesus in exorcisms is with oppressive structures which have transcended human understanding and coping ability.[18]

The act of liberation is symbolically scripted in the story. The demoniac who has been so hard to control adopts a subdued posture at the entry of jesus. He runs to jesus and worships him (v.6). The overall framework of the act of liberation is christological. jesus is the one in command. The spirit *begs* jesus earnestly not to send 'them' away out of the country (v.10). Later the spirits beg jesus to send them into the swine (v.12). The switch from singular to plural when referring to the demon which has taken control of the man is indicative of the chaotic world we are dealing with, in which the man is simultaneously a free agent and

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13 Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', pp. 335, 336.

14 Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', pp. 335, 336.

15 George A. Smith, *Historical Geography of the Holy Land* (25th edn) (London, 1931) pp. 289 ff. Cited in Myers, *Binding*, p. 191.

16 Myers, *Binding*, pp. 142, 143 and 193.

17 Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, p. 314.

18 A. Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac (Mark 5:1–20): A Socio-political Reading', in *Bible Bhashyam*, December 1996 (pp. 167–74), p. 171.

occupied territory, and in which 'the occupying force is at the same time single and multifarious'.[19] Ultimately, j esus' command is obeyed. Even the destruction of the Legion is at the 'command' of j esus, who literally dismisses them to be drowned in the sea (v.13).[20] The liberation ends in total transformation of the demoniac. He is no longer agitated as in his former self and he is clothed and in his right mind. This is a way of confirmation of the total liberation of the demoniac through an exorcism which creates a stir in the area.

Jesus the Impervious Boundary Crosser

In the light of the ethical principles which we identified earlier we can find defiance of uncleanness, compassion and confrontation featuring in this story. However, the central feature of the story seems to be confrontation. j esus crosses the boundary by moving to the other side. The setting talks of a gentile socio-symbolic space, and the living area of the demoniac is among the tombs. The symbolism of impurity cannot be neglected in the story. The man with the unclean spirit can be considered as being cultically unclean because of the nature of his dwelling place.[21] The presence of the swine also brings connotation of uncleanness. The role of pigs in the story, as the symbolic site where the imperial Roman forces are consigned to, also connects notions of impurity to the colonizers. The point which may be relevant here is that notions of 'pure and polluted' function as the epistemic sphere though which the perceptions about the oppressor are constructed in the story. This is the first instance where j esus enters a gentile environment.[22] However, this journey is a 'symbolic transit to a symbolic locale'. j esus' sphere of activity extends to the gentile socio-symbolic space. There is further corroboration of the gentile nature of the miracle when at the end of the miracle the geographical area is identified as Decapolis.[23]

The aspect of boundary crossing is implicit in the journey of j esus to 'the other side of the sea'. But the point is to understand such boat journeys as 'structural devices for the organization of the narrative *and* important symbolic actions in and of themselves'.[24] j ean Starobnski has initiated an ontological-theological way of understanding j esus' crossing of the sea:

> If the geographical-religious opposition (j ewish territory – pagan territory) presents the substation of an ecclesiological allegorizing, the image itself of the

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[19] Watson, *Text, Church and World*, p. 249.

[20] j . Duncan H. Derrett, 'Contribution to the Study of the Gerasene Demoniac', in *JSNT*, Vol. 3, 1979 (pp. 2–17), pp. 5 ff. Also cited in Myers, *Binding The Strong Man*, p. 191.

[21] Hooker, *Mark*, p. 142.

[22] Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac', p. 168.

[23] Werner Kelber, *The Kingdom in Mark: A New Place and A New Time* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 51.

[24] Myers, *Binding*, p. 194.

> crossing to a nocturnal, savage land inhabited by demons can also be read in an ontological-theological sense … The *crossing* of the 'flaunter' is the central event capable of functioning as the decisive *sign* both in ecclesiological allegorising and in the ontological reading. Christ *goes to the other*, to the adversary, the unbeliever, and the suffering man.[25]

It is this aspect of engaging with the other which is one of the features of jesus' compassion. jesus' healing and liberative activity cannot be confined to specific groups. It is inclusive and transcends the barriers of region and race. At the end, jesus interprets the miracle as an act of divine mercy. jesus asks the man to go home to his friends and tell them 'how much the Lord has done for you and what mercy he has shown you'. By interpreting the exorcism in terms of God's mercy, compassion is placed at the core of the liberation process. However, the feature that is predominant in the story is the feature of 'confrontation'. The confrontation between two powerful forces constitutes the meta-narrative in Mark. Within this meta-narrative one can see various confrontations. The primary confrontation is between the demon and jesus. But the 'confrontation' of jesus by the Gerasenes is also significant for us. We will be focussing on both aspects of the confrontation and draw out their implications for Dalit praxis.

The Text in the Impervious Dalit Context

Interpretation of the biblical text seems problematical if we take into consideration the Dalit understanding of possession as a socially acceptable form of subaltern resistance. However, a few scholars have identified possession along the lines of a coping mechanism. Sugirtharajah understands 'possession' as one of the defences of ordinary people to face and withstand the stranglehold of colonial oppression.[26] Strecker proposes understanding possession as 'performance', where the possessed person activates dramatically in public the role society regards as being indicative of possession.[27] As such it is a process based on and within an established cultural pattern.[28] Therefore, understanding possession as a socially accepted coping mechanism of an oppressed people can serve as a convergent trajectory which aids the hermeneutical appropriation of the text for the Indian context. An ethno-

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25 Cited in Christopher Burdon, '"To the Other Side": Construction of Evil and Fear of Liberation in Mark 5:1–20', in *JSNT*, Vol. 27, No. 2, December 2004 (pp. 149–67).

26 R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 94.

27 Christian Strecker, 'jesus and the Demoniacs', in Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce j. Malina and Gerd Theissen (eds) *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) (pp. 117–33), p. 122.

28 Strecker, 'jesus and the Demoniacs', p. 123.

cultural understanding of 'possession' in the Dalit context helps us to recognize the various points of convergence.

Robert Deliege, on the basis of his ethnographic research among Catholic *paraiyar* communities in Tamil Nadu, points out that among the *paraiyars* 'spirit possession is what may happen to people to disrupt the normal order of the world'. In this connection, Deliege raises the following questions:

> (c)ould we say that spirit possession is a symptom of the expression of the rejection of caste oppression by the Dalit Paraiyars? Would it mean that Dalits, who wish to break away from the existing social structure, are prone to demonic possession? And if so, is demonic possession a means of hitting out at an oppressive society?[29]

These questions indicate the possible ways in which we could make sense of demonic possession in the Dalit context. They help us to be open to the link between oppression and the deployment of the 'possession idiom' as a resistive tool. Some ethnographic studies have shown 'possession' to function as a symbolic act of dissent and rejection of hegemony. Clarke points out that possession among the Dalit communities is understood as visitation of the deity in which a particular human being 'operates as the agent of the deity' because the person 'participates in the power of the deity and mediates this divine power to people who come to them'.[30] There is recognition of the empowerment which accompanies 'transphysical rituals of possession' by the *sami* (deity) among the Dalits.[31]

We can see the translation of this sense of empowerment into protest, in the form of 'ritualistic dissent' directed explicitly against the 'upper castes', in the religiosity of two south Indian Dalit communities, the *Madigas* and *Paraiyars*. There is one ritual associated with the goddess *Matangi* under whose possession a *Madiga* priestess 'rushes about spitting on those who in ordinary circumstances would almost choose death rather than to suffer such pollution from a *Madiga*'.[32] Because of the *ritual nature* of this action, the caste people actually wait for a 'full measure of her invective'. However, the resistive element of her trance lies in 'wild', 'exulting songs', which speak of the 'humiliation to which she is subjecting the proud caste people'.[33] There is also a 'thoroughly abusive content'

[29] Robert Deliege, 'Demonic Possession in Catholic South India', in Michael (ed.), *Dalits in Modern India* (pp. 252–71), p. 269.

[30] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 76.

[31] Zoe C. Sherinian, 'Dalit Theology in Tamil Christian Folk Music: A Transformative Liturgy by james Theophilus Appavoo', in Selva j. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (eds), *Popular Christianity in India: Riting Between the Lines* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002) (pp. 233–53) p. 236.

[32] Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India* (Madras: CLS, 1925), p. 25. Italics mine.

[33] Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, p. 25.

to the songs. The medium of this cathartic expression is often anger expressed through derogatory language. The autonomous subjectivity which characterizes 'possession' makes it a social mechanism of emancipatory meaning-making. We can make the following conclusions on the function of possession in the Indian caste context on the basis of the above discussion, a) possession is public ritualistic protest in a communitarian context, b) it is understood by Dalits as participation in divine power, c) the 'consequences' of such possession are accepted by 'upper-castes' because of the ritualistic nature of the context.

Understood in this light (possession as resistive activity of the oppressed people) the story now poses some problems for a liberative interpretation because through the exorcism jesus has removed a tool of resistance from the oppressed people. Pointing to a possible understanding of jesus' exorcising action as 'neutering the only option the oppressed had in declaring their opposition to the colonial occupation', Sugirtharajah questions whether jesus has 'simply treated the symptom without confronting the system which produces such behaviour?' Has jesus 'effectively removed one of the potential tools in the hands of the subjugated people?'[34] Such questions bring out the need for a fresh re-reading of the text with a liberating focus.

From the perspective of *Dalits*, any interpretation of the text which would aim to mobilize this text as a biblical warrant to 'demonize' the conceptual understanding of possession within the Dalit communities would be hegemonic. In the light of an understanding of possession as resistance, our reading strategy should not seek to make the text a template to co-opt and domesticate resistive aspects of Dalit culture and religiosity on the basis of their non-conformity to the verities of 'Christian-*ness*'. Christian interpretations serving casteist interests would solely address the issue of the 'unchristian aspects' of Dalit religiosity. The hegemonic potential of these interpretations would mean that it would estrange the Dalits from their religiosity in which possession is understood as communication with the Divine; it would be hegemonic in the sense that it wrests from Dalits one of their resistive practices, it is also hegemonic in the sense that it creates binarisms within the Dalit communities on the basis of the Christian and the un-Christian. Bearing in mind these dangers, we need to interpret the story in a manner which will bring a fresh disclosure of its meaningfulness for Dalits.

Praxis: Rethinking Agency, Re-signifying Resistance

The passage offers us space to interrogate the way the Dalits 'symbolize' the experience of oppression and struggle in highly constrained situations to create new identities and ideological bases for action. But coming back to the question of jesus removing a 'coping mechanism' or even a tool of resistance from the oppressed, the passage throws new light. Primarily, from the perspective of a

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[34] Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 94.

Dalit reader, there seems to be a dialectic tension between the symbolic and real resistance present in the context. The demoniac has opted for a symbolic resistive tactic. A symbolic resistive tactic using a socially approved idiom is entirely understandable in a constrained life situation. However, one has to acknowledge that the resistive tactic the demoniac has adopted is an acquiescent tactic. The demoniac avoids conflict and is given a socially prescribed space, tombs, to express his dissent. The identity he receives as a resister is a socially sponsored status. When resistance or identity is socially sponsored, possibility of structural change is minimal because the ideology of the 'sponsor' is preservation and not transformation of the status quo.

The scenario in the story changes with Jesus' intervention. Jesus' emphasis seems to be on the primacy of community. In the Dalit situation we have seen how community is a prime source of resistance and survival. Further, Jesus helps the man to move beyond his socially ascribed identity. From the fringes he brings resistance to the city. He moves beyond an acquiescent ideology of resistance to a transformative ideology. He is now to be at the centre, sharing the news of the fall of the Legion and changing the social composition and structure of the society. The real realm was the context where the good news of liberation had to be spread. This acts as a catalyst for praxis. People's fear of the rulers are brought to the open. The people react with *amazement* at the man's proclamation of Jesus' liberative activity. This reaction, as we have already mentioned, is the reaction of people who recognize their conventional world being questioned and subverted. Thus, the man, who because of his suppressed resistive urge confined himself to alienation and self-destruction, now becomes the catalyst of possible change. He is empowered to challengingly engage with the locals, instilling the message of confidence and, moreover, by sharing the 'good news of liberation', deconstruct the absoluteness of the Legion.

Praxis as Resistance of Alienating Tendencies and Working in Solidarity

Markan temporal and spatial references contribute to the implied readers' appreciation of the narrative because of their allusive or symbolic character. Hence, spatial references have the function of acting as signifiers to aid the mapping of the overall plot of the narrative.[35] Upon close scrutiny we find the binarism of alienation/community corresponding with the binarism of subjugation/liberation in the story. There is a semantic value attached to alienation and community in the text. While alienation symbolically characterizes the oppressed state of the man, his liberation is characterized by his re-association with the community. The man who in his oppressed state inhabits *tombs* – the 'land of the dead' (the site of his introverted-resistive activity simultaneously the site of alienation and his

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[35] Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, 'Narrative Criticism: How Does the Story Mean', in Anderson and Moore (eds), *Mark and Method* (pp. 23–49), p. 32.

dehumanization) – is restored to community and is asked to go home to family and friends. Thus, the exorcism can be interpreted to mean liberation from alienation.

Understanding possession in general as resistive activity, what makes it demonic both from the perspective of the Dalit struggle as well as from the semantic connotations in the text is the aspect of alienation which estranges the man away from community and into self-destruction. For active resistance to take place there is a need for solidarity. jesus offers him freedom from this mode of resistance. The discursive arena of resistant practice now transits to community. Especially in contexts of occupation as well as of caste domination there are tendencies to alienate people from one another. In general, the presence of the Roman occupiers polarized people into those who resisted and those who collaborated with the occupiers.[36] That the Roman occupiers in this text have already achieved this goal of estranging the local people from one another is clear from the text. The locals have succumbed to the oppressors' ideology of dividing people. In this situation, jesus' intention of reintegrating the man into community has to be interpreted politically. It is not a removal of his 'socially accepted mode of resistance' but a liberation from the oppressors' deliberate and strategic ploy of alienation and estrangement from his own community (his friends with whom jesus reunites him). When the man requests to accompany jesus to be with him jesus refuses. The challenge is not to encourage a tendency of dependence but to enable the incarnation of the liberative activity in one's own local sphere.

From a Dalit perspective, jesus' actions are a recognition and affirmation of solidarity. Reinstating the man into the community is a subversive act which counters the strategy of alienation. It is a deliberate strategy which liberates the man – the icon of resistance – from alienation and helps him to recognize community as the proper sphere of resistive activity. There is emphasis on the corporate axis of action. Individuated responses towards transformation are an integral component for praxis as the urge for change has to come from within individuals. However, for this urge to gather force as a resistive surge it needs to have a corporate dimension whereby the energy of the individuated symbolic revolution will be a collective transformative force. This is one praxiological principle which emerges from the story.

A praxis-oriented reading of this text for the Dalits could point to working in solidarity with one another and to resist all alienating tendencies. The Dalit sense of solidarity and community is a great source of hope and resistance for the Dalits. Dalit solidarity as a symbiotic relationship between Dalits of different religious orientations emerges from their sense of pragmatism.[37] Dalit communities share in a togetherness which they construct in solidarity against forces which seek to victimise them. Dalit solidarity has sustained the Dalits, whether Christian or not, over a long time against forces which continuously seek to demean or disrupt their

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[36] Dormandy, 'The Expulsion ', p. 335.

[37] Robert Deliege, *The World of the 'Untouchable': Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 301.

communal life.[38] The foundation of subaltern solidarity is their shared experience of powerlessness. This solidarity 'acts as a cushion in the face of repeated suffering imposed by the dominant'.[39] The solidarity of the Dalits emerges from a pluralistic orientation which is 'incorporative, participatory, and cooperative – thus communitarian'.[40]

From a Dalit perspective, the story can also be interpreted as j esus's challenge to the *lone resister* to enthuse and empower others in the community to join him in the liberation struggle. The Dalit and other anti-caste movements have a history in which 'lone-resisters' like Ambedkar and j otiba Phule in Maharastra, Ayothee Das and Periyar in Tamil Nadu have acted as catalysts in mobilizing communities to join in the resistance against casteism. The basis of this resistance is their own experience of discrimination. This translation of experience into empowering praxis gives us fresh hermeneutical clues to understand j esus' action of reintegrating the man into the community. For the Dalits, the act of j esus reinstating the resister into the community, effectively disrupting the status quo, can be understood as having a counter-ideological thrust which envisages a future where Dalit resistance will be concretized and 'corporatized' in order to become more effective.

Praxis as Deconstruction of the Absoluteness of the Oppressor

In the story we find that the actions of the man are self-destructive. One has to understand the dichotomy between the man and the unclean spirit. Verse 8 makes it clear: j esus issues the command 'Come out of the man you unclean spirit'. The unclean spirit is not the man. But the unclean spirit has taken residence in the man and has 'besieged' his identity. It is not the man who resists j esus but the demon which has 'possessed' him. There is a complete lack of respect for the self. The demoniac was always howling and bruising himself with stones (v.5). The self-destructive tendencies of the man are paradoxically, but inextricably, linked to the 'power' of the demon. There is a tone of seeming helplessness in overcoming the demon. Understanding the text from a socio-literary perspective can help us to see in the portrayal of the seemingly un-subduable demon a mirroring of the political reality, which was marked by futile attempts to chain down Israel's oppressors.[41] The self-destructive tendencies of the possessed man here can be considered to bear a reflection of the sense of futility of first century j ewish history, which was brutally displayed in the mass suicide at Masada.[42] Due to the 'dispiriting sense of powerlessness', the Maccabbean revolt had degenerated into sordid strife, the

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[38] Sathianathan Clarke, 'Hindutva, Religious and Ethnocultural Minorities, and Indian-Christian Theology', in *HTR*, Vol. 95, No. 2, 2002 (pp. 197–226), p. 211.

[39] A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Living Through Conflicts: The Spirit of Subaltern Resurgence', in *VJTR*, Vol. 65, j une, 2001 (pp. 465–76), pp. 471, 472.

[40] Clarke, 'Hindutva', p. 212.

[41] Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

[42] Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

Sicarii's assassination campaign was directed against their fellow countrymen.[43] Thus, instead of resisting the conquerors, the resistive tendencies of the Jewish locals were subverted to intra-Jewish enmity. They directed their pent-up frustration on each other. Oppression operated psychosocially.

Liberation takes the form of symbolic repudiation of the power and absoluteness of the demon in the narrative. In the narrative there is a gradual shift in the perception of the demon. Crossan calls the exorcism 'individuated symbolic revolution'.[44] Jesus effectuates a reconfiguration of the perceptions of the oppressor. On the one hand the demon is 'Legion' (many) and cannot be restrained or overpowered, but on the other hand it is brought to a subdued position in the course of its confrontation with Jesus. The agency of the situation rests with Jesus. In a situation of challenge and riposte, while Jesus *issues orders* (v.8), and *permissions* (v.13) which consequently culminate in the destruction of the Legion, the Legion *bows* before Jesus (v.6), *adjures* Jesus not to torment him (v.7), *begs him earnestly* not to send him out of the country (v.10) but to send him into the swine (v.12), and ultimately *rushes to its self-destruction*. By placing the story within the framework of challenge and riposte, the supremacy of Jesus over the legion is reinforced.

The story is a case of the self-negating activation of the repressed resistance operative in the man's colonized consciousness. The result of this is dehumanization – (he lives in the space meant for the non-living) and alienation. One of the important issues it raises for the Dalit context concerns the liberation of 'enslaved personality'. The story highlights the highly disconcerting fact that internalization of the absoluteness of the oppressor can result in self-destructive psychological states. Thus, the story also enables us to look at the psychological effects of oppression on one's identity. The self-destructive patterns of resistance of the demoniac are challenged through a 'Christological vision' of the power of Christ over forces of oppression. It is this emphasis on Jesus' authority over unclean spirits which comes up in this account, which is a dramatic fulfilment of the cry of the demons in 1:24: 'Have you come to destroy us?'[45] 'Jesus is able to control both the raging of the wind and waves and the raging of a possessed demoniac, since in both cases the forces responsible for the outbursts recognize his superior authority'.[46]

The praxiological message for the Dalits is to be critical about the insidious ways in which myths of the 'absoluteness' of the oppressors are perpetuated in order to curb their resistive potential. It is especially important for the Dalits if one looks at it from the perspective of frustration at the incessantly futile attempts at resistance. Casteism has resulted in perpetuating a lack of respect for the self among the Dalits. Their self-destruction lies in the 'sense of inferiority' that has been

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43 Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 336.

44 Crossan, *Jesus*, p. 91.

45 Hooker, *Mark*, p. 141.

46 Hooker, *Mark*, p. 141.

drilled into them. Casteist oppressors have sought the perpetuation of the negative image of the Dalits actively through the fabrication of myths, legends and rituals to serve their own interests.[47] It has to be acknowledged that this perpetuation of a negative and stereotypical image over generations has led to great psychological damage to the Dalits, who 'developed a 'wounded psyche' and a distorted self-image which have destroyed their self respect too'.[48] jesus uses the medium of emancipatory mythography in facilitating the exorcism. If one army, the 'Legion', is responsible for the demoniac's repressed consciousness, the familiar religious imagery of another army (the Egyptian army which is drowned in the sea in the Exodus narrative) is evoked to signify the exorcism. This 'mythical' reference is invoked as a form of 'transformance'. It is 'literally' a symbolic contest between Legion and 'the *Drowned* Egyptian armies in the Exodus narrative'. By evoking the familiar Exodus image where the 'oppressive powers' were defeated, there is a reaffirmation of the man's identity in positive terms. This aspect of the exorcism is affirmative of one of the important symbolic media of Dalit emancipation. Reconfiguring their identity using the idiom of re-mythologization is an important praxiological tool of the Dalits. Dalits tell their stories by utilizing and subversively revalidating the dominant symbolic configurations and mythographies so as to rearticulate their subjectivity and identity in an affirmative and identity enhancing manner. In a constrained life situation, village mythographies serve as subtle acknowledgements of the subversive potential of Dalits. Analysing the nuances of such religious remythologization in the context of the Dalit communities (*Paraiyars*), Sathianathan Clarke comments as follows:

> (R)eligious remythologization is a domain of specific meaning making for the Paraiyar. It is the arena of tactful contestation in which the hegemonic outlook of Hinduism is weakened. This process of construing emancipatory mythographies, as just explicated, involves both an interaction with and appropriation of forms from the dominant group and a subtle rejection of it in order to reclaim for the Paraiyar their own human identity and rationale for existence.[49]

In a similar way in the story, a past story of victory is 're-membered' and even re-enacted to subvert a situation of fatalism and defeat. Freedom is thus brought from the self-destructive power of fatalism. The message is that Dalit resistive surge cannot thrive on the basis of the conceptions of 'absoluteness of the oppressor' that have been conscripted in their minds. It remains a reality that the internalization of their economic and political disempowerment curtails any pragmatic chances of undoing the power structure of the hierarchy. Hence,

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47 Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, 'Foreword', to S. Manickam's *Nandanar, The Dalit Martyr: A Historical Reconstruction of his Times* (Madras: CLS, 1992).

48 S. Manickam, *Conspiracy of Silence* (Madurai: Dalit Research Centre, 1995), pp. 11–12.

49 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 108, see also n. 28 on p. 134.

the challenge is to move beyond such internalizations because internalization of *victimhood* in relation to the 'unsurpassable' might of the oppressors would not be resistive. The significance of the story for the Dalits is that the first steps of the emancipatory process are to break meta-narratives of the oppressors which result in self-defeatism.

Praxis as non-Collaboration and non-Collusion

The initial reaction of the Gerasenes to jesus' liberative activity is one of 'fear' towards his strange voltaic power. In verse 15, when the people of the neighbourhood come and see the demoniac sitting with jesus, clothed and in his right mind, they are *afraid.* They beg jesus to leave the neighbourhood. The aspect of jesus *leaving a place* or being *made to leave* the place where he has done a miraculous fact is often related to resistance against jesus by those who are affected by jesus' acts of subversion and those associated with the structures which jesus repudiates (Mk 1:45, 3:6 and 7). It may be understood as an indication of the local inhabitants' 'fear of jesus' 'uncanny power'.[50] 'Amazement' is often a reaction which arises among those who sense jesus undermining the security of their conventional world (2:12).[51] If we understand the locals' reaction to jesus in relation to the loss of the pigs, we can understand that he is not reckoned as 'a boon to the local community'.[52] Economic conjunctions with the healing can't be discounted, taken the fact that Gerasa as a port city played an important role in the lucrative trade that the Romans maintained with the southern parts of Arabia and India.[53] In the territory under occupation it is possible that some 'profit out of oppressive foreign structures'.[54]

The story of the Gerasenes can be interpreted as the story of the collaborators and colluders. The Gerasenes functioned as collaborators with the Roman rulers by resisting any subversion of the status quo. They were collaborators in maintaining the form of 'Roman peace'[55] which implied unquestioning and subdued acceptance of the rulers. Any open hostility or backlash against the occupiers was reproached vociferously and it may be possible the people did not want a backlash. They had adopted accommodative strategies by way of which they no longer resisted the oppressors. Their actions here can be understood as especially significant exercises

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[50] Hooker, *Mark*, p. 144.

[51] john P. Keenan, *The Gospel of Mark: A Mahayana Reading* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 143.

[52] F. Scott Spencer, *What did Jesus Do?: Gospel Profiles of Jesus Personal Conduct* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 217.

[53] H.C. Waetjen, *A Recording of Power: A Socio-Political Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 116.

[54] Gabriel, 'The Gerasene Demoniac', p. 170.

[55] Dormandy, 'The Expulsion', p. 334.

in 'cultural hegemony'.[56] The collaborators or the colluders are caught up in the process of assimilation and transference. Their behaviour oscillates between tendencies of transference and assimilation. The phenomenon of transference had been their social coping mechanism whereby they had not resorted to open confrontation but had defected to a life-style conforming to the colonial situation. Through assimilation they now replicate a hierarchy.

If we understand demon-possession as a coping strategy under colonial rule, the dramatic removal of that condition by jesus may not only have 'disrupted existing social patterns of dealing with demoniacs, but it might also have been seen as a threat to an accepted mode of containing open hostility toward the Roman oppressors'.[57] The people could have been upset that the hostility towards the Romans, which was so far socially contained, could no longer be solely symbolic or contained because the man who was the embodiment of the resistive hostility had been reintegrated by jesus into the community which was not symbolic but real. Thus, when the dynamics of their social pattern is threatened and subverted, the locals resist jesus's presence. jesus' presence is perceived as a public danger.[58] The locals feared that jesus was interfering with their pattern of dealing with people who actively resist the occupation. There is a transition from the periphery to the centre. When the once-alienated become part of the centre, the ones who are affected are those who thrive because of the hiatus between the centre and the periphery. From the text it is obvious that the Gerasenes had dissociated themselves from the demoniac earlier. Now, the attempts of jesus to re-associate the once-alienated is at least inconvenient, if not overtly outrageous, to the extent that they resist jesus' continued presence in the community because of the subversion of circumstances.

The character of the locals is significant for us as we can relate it to people and structures in India who actively resist the self-assertion and other affirmative strategies of the Dalits. Self-assertion of the Dalits is usually met with hostility and stiff resistance by both the upper-caste people as well as elite Dalits. This leads to atrocities being inflicted on the Dalits who are self-assertive and who strive actively to move beyond their silent-suffering, because self-assertion of the Dalits means a threat to the traditional social-order. We cannot ignore the economic implications of a restructuring of social order, with its associated fear of losing a much-needed menial workforce and agricultural labourers.[59] The attempts of the caste groups to sustain the degradation and enslavement of the Dalits have

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[56] S.M. Parish, *Hierarchy and its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. XXII.

[57] C.S. LaHurd, 'Reader Response to Ritual Elements in Mark 5:1–20', in *BTB*, Vol. 20 (1990) (pp. 154–60).

[58] Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to Mark* (2nd edn) (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 284.

[59] Felix Wilfred, *From the Dusty Soil: Contextual Reinterpretation of Christianity* (Madras: University of Madras, 1995), p. 107.

strong economic reasons. They are indispensable for agricultural operations and are the 'backbone of agreistic labour'.[60] According to G.A. Natesan, without the Dalits 'agriculture would be impossible, the economy of Indian life would be most seriously upset, and anything like an organized revolt by them on western lines will undoubtedly mean ruin to the Indian society'.[61] Thus, it is not difficult to understand why a transgression of their enforced-status is actively thwarted by the upper castes and local elites. Those who subjugate the Dalits do so because they recognize their indispensability not only for the Indian economy but also for their own livelihood as agricultural serfs and landlords. Thus, we can say that what this passage highlights is the vested interests of the 'local elite'.

Collaboration and collusion with casteism takes place in a many ways and not necessarily through atrocities against self-assertive and resistive Dalits. There is a 'conspiracy of silence' which deliberately ignores Dalit struggles, contributions and history.[62] Through its silence the Indian Church has manifested itself as a 'reactionary force to curb' the struggling Dalits.[63] The source of this silence is the urge to perpetuate the prevailing status quo. The Indian Church has for long functioned as a collaborator and colluder with casteism and has accommodated caste-based discrimination in the Indian Church on the premise of the dichotomy between religion and social structures. The caste system was perpetuated within the Churches, unassailed and untouched.[64] The individual pietistic focus of Christianity has been on the 'other-worldly' aspects of religion, because of which the struggles of Dalits get neglected in the mission of the Church.[65] There are many reasons why the Church has been collaborating with casteism. Today, the reasons are more towards holding on to the vestiges of power. Assertive tendencies by the Dalits would change the 'power equations' in the Indian Church and, given their numbers in the Indian Church, it would be difficult for the upper castes to be in control, hence there is a sense of threat which evinces strategic thwarting of Dalit resurgence. The other reason is the common view that the Dalits are a liability for the Churches. Engaging in their struggles for self-dignity and being in solidarity would mean that the Churches have to evolve new mission strategies, and engage more critically with governmental and other administrative agencies to see that justice is administered. This may involve getting into confrontation with local

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60 S. Manickam, *Conspiracy*, p. 7.

61 G.A. Natesan, *The Depressed Classes of India* (reprint) (New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, 1977), p. 181.

62 V.T. Raj Shekhar, *The Black Untouchables of India* (Atlanta, Ottawa: Clarity Press, 1987), p. 49.

63 D. Manohar Chandra Prasad, *Dalit Christian Consciousness* (Bangalore: Rachana Publications, 1994), pp. 1–3.

64 M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of Indian Renaissance* (Madras: CISRS, CLS, 1970), p. 256.

65 Ayub Daniel, 'Approaches of Missions and Churches Towards the Indian Caste System', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 2, june, 1995 (pp. 5–10).

elites and politicians, which may have serious repercussions. It is this sense of fear regarding confronting unjust structures and systems which makes the Church take a passive role in aligning with Dalit struggles for self-assertion and reclamation of dignity and respect.

Today, there are many Dalit communities which are involved actively in struggles for justice. But they meet stiff opposition. Andrew Wingate in his research on *The Church and Conversion in the Tamil Area of South India* points to one example where a converted Christian Dalit tried to become elected to the *Panchayat* (local governing council). The *Reddys* (local non-brahmin upper castes) 'tried to block this by trying to ban converted Christians from the fields they traditionally used for latrine purposes'.[66] Contradiction of the traditional interests of the caste groups often results in violence. The police firing against Dalits protesting against the desecration of the statue of Ambedkar in Ramabai Ambedkar Nagar in North East Mumbai on j uly 11 1997, which led to the killing of 11 people, is one example of a violent way in which Dalit protests are quashed.[67] in *Madurai*, when Dalits no longer accepted the disabilities imposed on them as a matter of course, and emphatically sought the translation of their legal rights to practice, the result was an increasing conflict with the upper castes, who organized opposition.[68] The role of the Church here in situations like these, when the Dalits stood up for their rights, has not been delineated by Dalit theology. An important issue which needs to be tackled is to tap the latent resistive urge of the Dalits and translate it as creative and constructive manifestations of struggle for co-operative and mutually-affirming communitarian life. There is need for a praxis of non-collaboration and non-collusion with the dominant.

Implications for Dalit Theology

The central motif of the story understood against its background is thus one of freedom from *resistance which is confined only to the symbolic realm*. This repressed resistance is the result of a basic tension between the urge for liberation and the internalization of the overpowering nature of the oppressor. This story can also help us to critically question symbolic resistance. The problem with solely symbolic resistance, in spite of all its emancipatory potential, is that it is symbiotically linked to the unconscious reinforcement of a weak self-image. It involves a 'retreat' into the symbolic world. There is a concomitant element of negative conditioning which decides the remit of resistive-practice. I do not

[66] Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion: A Study of Recent Conversions to and from Christianity in the Tamil Area of South India* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1997), p. 62.

[67] Prakash Louis, 'Dalits and Priestly Formation', in *VJTR*, Vol. 64, 2000 (pp. 121–31), p. 125.

[68] Andre Beteille, 'Caste and Political Group Formation in Tamilnad', in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997) (pp. 71–93), p. 88.

dispute the cathartic function of such symbolic resistive practice; however, as a mode of orthopraxis, it needs a radical redefinition. All tendencies to extensively romanticize symbolic resistance has to be critically analysed. However, when such resistive practice serves a proleptic function it can become critical and constructive through its manifestation as orthopraxis. Romanticizing Dalit culture can often be paternalistic, and very often Dalit theorists and theologians have identified liberative characteristics as those which are pragmatic and not merely symbolic. Development of self-esteem, reflection on people's experiences, resistance to the tendency to internalize hegemonic cultures and engaging in struggle together are identified by Theophilus Appavoo as liberative practices as he explores the possibility of utilizing Dalit experiences and culture for liturgical purposes.[69] The *cause* or *end* for which attention is focused upon Dalit experiences and culture is as important for Dalits as their culture and experiences. 'The goal of any people's movement is to ensure that structural change takes place whether brought by themselves or on association with others. However, nothing short of a structural change can really guarantee liberation for the people from the oppressive system which is deep rooted.'[70]

For Dalit theology, the theological process doesn't end with mere identification of the liberative aspects of Dalit religion and culture. Rather, the theological process is completed when the liberative practices are cross-fertilized with the liberative aspects of the Bible and result in praxis. Perceptions of victimhood are pertinent for the construction of ideological discourse of Dalit liberation.[71] However, these perceptions should not be considered as the completed praxis by themselves because there is no structural engagement. There is a need for a shift in configuration of resistance. However, there are praxiological implications for the Indian Church, because symbolic resistance also brings out the paradox of the Dalits where on the one hand there is *latent resistance* to the degrading identity forced on them, but on the other, their social and economic roles in the local community are to a large extent determined by the dominant group's actions to *suppress* their resistive urge. Hence, the Church's responsibility is to resist all attempts to thwart the self-assertion of the Dalits.

The challenge for the Indian Church from this story is to work to move beyond symbolic resistance to pragmatic involvement in social change and how to translate the arbitrariness of the manifestation of the Dalit liberative urge into concrete engagement with structural transformation. The sphere of real constructive resistive activity can never be divorced from the collective agency. Resistive practice in reality becomes delusion when it results in estrangement rather than engagement.

The Gerasene exorcism is the expression of j esus' liberative power through a new idiom of re-engagement. The once periphery, the once alienated now constitutes the epicentre of the action of proclaiming liberation. What has so far

[69] Sherinian, 'Dalit Theology in Tamil Christian Folk Music', pp. 233–53.

[70] Shiri, 'People's Movements', p. 120.

[71] See Raja, 'Living through Conflicts' (pp. 465–76).

provided an ideological, economic and social base for the accorded status of the man has been transgressed, to the ‘amazement’ of all those who have acquiesced to the existing status quo and may have derived their own identity and economic base from the former structure. There is empathy on the part of j esus when he uses the same medium which the man was using for articulating his resistance – the medium of possession and exorcism. It is a dissent of hegemony in the symbolic realm. What is important is that j esus subverts the contents of the medium in which the man was working out his own subjectivity. From a subjectivity of victimhood j esus leads him to a subjectivity where he helps him to repudiate the hegemonic symbolic reign of the ‘Legion’, leading him to re-association and reintegration into communitarian life. In that way pragmatism characterizes the praxiological efforts of j esus. This paradigm has implications for Dalit theology as it challenges Dalit theology to rethink the liberative nature of Dalit agency and re-signify resistance in a manner in which the practical takes precedence over the symbolic.

Chapter 7

Re-configuring Dalit Praxis – Re-imagining the Other

In this chapter we will be dealing with the story of the woman who is identified in Mark as a ‘gentile, of Syrophoenician origin’, and in Matthew as a ‘Canaanite’. The woman boldly approaches j esus to secure healing for her daughter, whose ‘predicament’ is identified in both the gospels under the taxonomy of demon-possession. Though initially j esus responds to the woman in a seemingly harsh manner, the story concludes with j esus confirming the deliverance of the woman’s daughter. It seems as if the emphasis in this story is on the significant advance of j esus’ understanding of his mission and of the inclusive nature of the Kingdom of God (*basileia*), through his dialogue with the gentile woman. The image of j esus that emerges from this story is of one who is sensitive to boundary issues and who, after initial reticence, is prepared to cross such boundaries.[1]

This story has profound implications for the task of identifying and addressing issues that hinder the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. One such issue is the politics of othering – where we create images of the other in a manner which perpetuates the status quo. This politics of othering is present both within and outside Dalit theology and hinders the possibility of praxis between Dalits and non-Dalits. By focusing on how there is a subversion of ‘otherness’ and ‘othering’ in the story, I intend to glean certain principles of praxis which could help Dalit theology to forge purposive and pragmatic partnerships with others.

Interpreting the Story in the Dalit Context: The ‘Other’ Politics

This story would have held much pertinence to the readers of both Mark and Matthew. The descriptions of the woman as Syrophoenician or Canaanite are intended for the listeners to whom the stories are addressed. While the Markan description – ‘a Greek’ – could be understood to mean a Hellenstic j ew, the addition ‘a Syrophoenician by birth’ makes it clearer that ‘the woman is a pagan from the area’.[2] One also needs to comprehend the significance of the unprecedented redactional move that Matthew makes in his version of the story by naming the

[1] Loader, ‘Challenged at the Boundaries’, p. 49.

[2] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 126.

woman a 'Canaanite'.[3] For the mind familiar with Israelite history this word is evocative of images of 'polytheism, sacred prostitution, and ethnicity beyond the pale'.[4] As most of Mark's readers belonged to gentile backgrounds, this story would provide them the 'reassurance that Jesus himself responded to the faith of a Gentile and gave her a share in the blessing of the Kingdom'.[5] In Matthew it is obvious that the barrier which needs to be overcome is the 'division between Jews and Gentiles'.[6] Elaine Mary Wainwright, who focuses on the Matthean version of the story, suggests that in the light of the Matthean redaction the story can be understood in a rhetorical sense, as answering the question of the participation of women in religious activities in the Matthean community.[7] Through the redaction process one can understand the narrative tension in the Gospel concerning the position of both gentiles and women in the Jesus movement. The woman's persistence reflects the persistent struggle of women in the Matthean community amidst obstacles. According to Wainwright's reconstruction of the Matthean subtext, the characterization of the woman has a rhetorical function, because she both embodies the struggle of the community and the solution for the struggle. Thus:

> Within the Mathean community, this story could therefore have affirmed the contribution of gentile women to the life of the community as well as legitimating women's participation in its liturgical and theological life. If Jesus so affirms the question of this woman who extended his understanding of his mission, so too must the community accept the active participation of women in its deliberations regarding its understanding of its mission and life style.[8]

Wainwright's reading emphasizes that the recipients of the 'bread' of Jesus's *basileia* may involve marginal groups like women and gentiles.[9] Wainwright's interpretation is in conformity with Fiorenza's reconstruction of the story where the woman 'makes a theological argument against limiting the Jesuanic inclusive table-community and discipleship of equals to Israel alone'.[10] Fiorenza also finds clues to the historical leadership of women in opening up the Jesus movement to 'Gentile sinners' (Gal. 2:15). The story of the Syrophoenician woman makes

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3 Jim Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word in the Logos of Christ; or the Difference the Syro-Phoenician Woman Makes to Jesus', in *Semeia*, Vol. 75, 1996 (pp. 61–85), p. 63.

4 Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 64.

5 Hooker, *Mark*, p. 183.

6 Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 138.

7 Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyther, 1991), p. 49.

8 Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 243.

9 Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 102.

10 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, p. 161. Quoted by Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible in the Non-Biblical World* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1995), pp. 80, 81.

women's contribution to one of the most crucial transitions in early Christian beginnings historically visible'.[11] On the basis of the above analysis we can conclude that the passage can be connected to the inclusive nature of jesus' ministry as well as to the breaking down of ethnic and gender barriers.

One of the riddles besetting an interpretation of the passage is to understand jesus' words to the woman: 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Mark 7:27). In Matthew there are additional details, like jesus' refusal to answer the woman at all (Matthew 15:23) and the addition of the words, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Matthew 15:24), before jesus says 'it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs' (Matthew 15:26). Situations like this, which evoke a sharp response, can be classified as a rhetorical form called responsive *chreia*.[12] Scholars have often sought to soften the offence implicit the term. Hooker understands the term in that context as jesus' challenge to the woman 'to justify her request'.[13] Soares-Prabhu suggests that in the light of the generally unprejudiced nature of jesus as well as his 'appreciative references' to gentiles (Matthew 8:10; Luke 13:29), this seemingly harsh refusal of the Syrophoenician woman's request ' … is to be read not as a racist insult but as a provocative challenge of the woman's faith'.[14]

However, Gerd Theissen's socio-historical analysis of the economic relationship between Galilee and the regions of Tyre and Sidon gives us a fresh perspective to understand the verbal encounter between jesus and the woman. Theissen's interpretation is that jesus' language of children, bread and dogs can be understood as an aphorism about the asymmetries which prevailed between the Tyrians and the destitute Galilean peasants.[15] David Catchpole opines that jesus' sayings to the Syrophoenician woman is 'heavy with Galilean prejudice, fuelled by ingrained social, political, historical, economic and religious experiences and attitudes'.[16]

In the context of the story, the regions of Tyre and Galilee were both under Roman occupation and were the site of imperial control and oppressive colonial politics.[17] However, the economic implications of the imperial control were felt differently in Tyre and Galilee. Tyre was a wealthy trading city. Its source of

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[11] Fiorenza, quoted by Kwok Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, pp. 80, 81.

[12] jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster john Knox Press, 1998), p. 52.

[13] Hooker, *Mark*, p. 183.

[14] Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, p. 158.

[15] Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) (Translated by Linda Maloney), pp. 66–77.

[16] David Catchpole, *Jesus People: The Historical Jesus and the Beginnings of Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 177.

[17] Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman (Mark 7:24–30)', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 4, Dec. 2004 (pp. 50–53), p. 50.

income was its metal work, the production of purple dye and its vantage location as a port city, which aided extensive trade with the Mediterranean region.[18] Its financial stability was such that even the j erusalem temple treasury was maintained in Tyrian coins in spite of the fact that the coins had the god Melkart on them.[19] While Tyre and Sidon were two of the wealthiest ports on the coast, Galilee was inhabited by poor peasants who suffered a threefold oppression because of 1) Roman Imperialism, 2) the Herodean monarchy which fawned on Rome, and 3) Temple politics in j udea.[20]

Theissen links j esus' language of bread, children and dogs to the economic relationship between the Tyrians and the destitute Galilean peasants. In spite of its thriving trading industry based on metal work and purple dye, Tyre had to depend on importing agricultural produce from the hinterlands of Galilee and the rural parts of the city, which served as 'the 'breadbasket' of the metropolis of Tyre.[21] This meant the exploitation of the Galilean peasants, as their produce was sold by the ruling class of Galilee to the highest bidders from Tyre. This meant a constant shortage of food for the Galilean peasants, as most of their produce was exported to Tyre.[22] Moreover, the Galilean peasants couldn't compete with the rich Tyrians to purchase the food necessary for them. They were, to use a Marxian concept, 'alienated' from the product of their labour.

As the story progresses, one can discern that there is an implicit assumption and reflection of ethnic, cultural, and socio-political hostility between j ews and their gentile neighbours.[23] In this light, one can understand the irony of j esus' words. His words can be understood as reflecting on the economic and political relations between the Tyrians and Galilean peasants. j esus' words can be interpreted as clearly affirming his solidarity with the cause of the Galilean peasants – the children to whom the bread rightfully belonged. By employing the metaphorical language of 'children' and 'dogs' he can be seen as emphasizing the preference that the 'vulnerable' have in his ministry over the dominant. It can also be understood as chiding the Tyrians, and 'conscientizing' the woman about the asymmetries which prevailed between Galilee and Tyre in their entitlement to food supplies. This interpretation by Theissen is also very helpful in appropriating the story in the context of the Dalit struggles for justice.

Even traditionally, the regions of Tyre and Sidon were notorious not only for their 'gentile' identity but also for their oppressive and economically exploitative tendencies. One cannot neglect the perception and reputation that Tyre had among the j ews. Isaiah 23, j oel 3:4–8 and Zechariah 9:2–4 contain oracles against Tyre

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18 Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 73.

19 Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Emergence of Christianity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), p. 208.

20 Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 50.

21 Cited in Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 51.

22 Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 51.

23 Myers, *Binding*, p. 204.

and Sidon. These oracles reflect hostility towards Tyre and Sidon, both powerful trading centres. In the light of these prophetic oracles, the picture which emerges of Tyre and Sidon 'from a j ewish perspective' is of a Gentile people who achieved 'proud power and superior wealth by harshly oppressing their j ewish neighbours'.[24] j oel 3:4–6 brings out the oppressive relationship as follows:

> v.4) O Tyre and Sidon … I will turn your deeds upon your own heads swiftly and speedily.
> v.5) For you have taken my silver and my gold, and have carried my rich treasures into your temples.
> v.6) You have sold the people of j udah and j erusalem to the Greeks removing them far from their own border.

Thus, we can argue that the implied function of Tyre and Sidon in Mark may be to focus attention on the image of the 'gentile economic oppressor'. So, in my interpretation of the story in the context of the Dalit community's struggle for justice, it will be pertinent for me to accord hermeneutical valence to this dimension of the dialogue between j esus and the woman, as it can help us to articulate models of justice which are 'consensual' and dialogical.

Both j esus and the woman have fluid identities in the story. There are aspects of their identity which makes them dominant and marginal simultaneously. For example, in the light of the analysis of the oppressive economic relationship between Galilee and Tyre, j esus belongs to the oppressed group as he identifies himself with the Galilean peasants. However, because of his capacity to heal, as well as his own identity as a male and as a non-gentile in the text, he is portrayed as the dominant. He is the benefactor. Matthew appends the acclamation 'son of David' to the woman's pleas for mercy (Mt 15:22). This acclamation is usually used in contexts where requests for benefactions were made (Mt 9:27, 20:30, 31).[25] Thus, Matthew, while framing the woman as subordinate and weak, presents j esus 'as having power, regardless of the historical and political situation of the people of Israel in this historical moment'.[26] j esus, with his power of benefaction, has the power to alleviate the woman's deprivation. Thus, he is not to be understood only as one who is deprived, rather he also occupies a dominant position in the encounter.

Similarly, the woman is also 'simultaneously at the boundaries of the privileged and the marginalized'.[27] The portrait of the woman which emerges in the passage is 'of a female resident of a bilingual (Greek or Aramaic) region harboring a minority

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24 j ohn Paul Heil, *The Gospel of Mark as a Model for Action: A Reader-Response Commentary* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), p. 17.

25 Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 44.

26 Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts: A Cultural Reading of Matthew 15: 21–28', in *Semeia*, Vol. 78, 1997 (pp. 71–83), p. 75.

27 Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 75.

mix of j ewish folk. As a Syro-Phoenician who is also a Hellene and one whose daughter sleeps on a “bed” rather than a mattress (a detail evocative of status), the woman is subtly indicated as a well-to-do citizen’.[28] The term ‘Greek’ could also mean a member of the ‘Hellenistic upper class of Syria, which consisted mainly of Greeks but also included many Hellenized natives’.[29] Her Hellenized and urban status (as we can discern from a socio-political reading of j esus’ aphorism about the bread) affirm her status as an elite. As a Tyrian who was dependent on the rural hinterlands of Galilee for agricultural goods, the woman is the embodiment of a problem for j ewish people in the rural areas, because food was liable to be passed to the urban area and away from the poorer j ewish areas where it was produced.

However, her marginal status cannot be ignored. Richard A. Horsely understands the identity of the woman as one who is doubly oppressed, a ‘single mother’ with a little child.[30] Her double description as a gentile (a Greek) of Syrophoenician origin,[31] affirms her marginal status, because, understood from the j ewish perspective, she is an unclean gentile. Her daughter’s possession augments the possibility of further stigmatization. This can be an important anthropological theological category as we exegete the text.

The identity of the woman, when understood against the prevailing laws of impurity, makes her an embodiment of impurity. As a pagan woman she ‘is “unclean” by birth, a foreigner and a female, and “untouchable” because of her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit’.[32] Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, who attempts to recapture the resonances of this pericope from a South Asian feminist perspective, connects it to the context of the cultural and ritual ‘impurity’ ascribed to women in South Asia:

> Reinterpreting the encounter of the Syro-Phoenician woman and j esus from a South Asian feminist perspective reveals many icons for women caught between understandings of purity and impurity … the definition of cleanliness still forms one basis for discrimination against and isolating women. The designation of what is clean and what is unclean is not a clinical diagnosis of one’s surroundings. It is still embedded in cultural structures that determine who is clean and who is unclean.[33]

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[28] Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 67.

[29] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 126.

[30] Richard A. Horsely, *Hearing the Whole Story: The Politics and Plot in Mark’s Gospel* (Westminster: j ohn Knox Press, 2001), p. 213.

[31] Malbon, ‘Narrative Criticism’, p. 44.

[32] Hisako Kinukawa, *Woman and Jesus in Mark: A Japanese Feminist Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), p. 53.

[33] As cited in Aruna Gnanadason, ‘j esus and the Asian Woman: A Post-colonial look at the Syro-Phoenician Woman/Canaanite Woman from an Indian Perspective’, in *Studies in World Christianity*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2001 (pp. 162–77), p. 169.

She argues that the focus of the story is on the category of impurity, since the racial and ethnic identity of the Syrophoenician woman denote 'uncleanness'.[34] Aruna Gnanadason identifies the woman as a Dalit woman on the basis of her impurity.[35] Japanese feminist theologian Hisako Kinukawa portrays Jesus as challenging the boundaries of purity and pollution and repudiating them by transcendence.[36]

One can also, evocatively, capture strikingly similar resonances of marginality between the woman and the Dalits by focusing on the term 'dog'. As far as the text goes, the term 'dog' resonates and reiterates her marginal identity – as a gentile. Such identity cannot be divested of its connotations of impurity. In Amrita Pritam's poem 'The Pariah' (of which I only quote the relevant parts), we can see how the term 'dog' and the term '*Pariah*' (which is the name of a prominent Tamil Dalit community) are used interchangeably:

> I only remember
> that Pariah
> who entered our empty room
> for some unknown reason.
> And the door was locked outside
> Three days later
> when the deal was clinched
> our house was sold.
> We exchanged the keys for money.
> The new owner
> Was shown each room.
> And in one of the rooms we found
> The corpse of that dog
> I have never heard that dog bark.
> I only remember the smell of its corpse.[37]

Though the poet here maintains an ambivalence as to whether the poem refers to a '*Pariah*' (as the title indicates) or to a stray dog per se, no such ambivalence prevails in the South Indian situation where the term 'dogs' are used as metaphors for Dalit communities. Clarke draws attention to this fact:

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[34] Ranjini Wickramaratne Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman: A South Asian Feminist Perspective', in Amy-Jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds), *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p. 102.

[35] Gnanadason, 'Jesus and the Asian Woman', pp. 167–9.

[36] Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p. 52.

[37] Amrita Pritam, 'The Pariah', in A.K. Ramanujan and Vinay Dharwedkar (eds), 'Sixteen Modern Indian Poems', *Daedalus*, Vol. 118, No. 4 (Fall 1989), pp. 325–6. Quoted in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 1.

> In South India there is a somewhat dexterously malicious conjoining of these two references. Thus, Dalits and dogs could be spoken of as being part of the same reference. This has its roots in the notion that Dalits are less than human and ought to be kept outside the contours of the societal household, just as dogs (as is the general custom in rural India) are to be kept outside the living space of the human household.[38]

Thus, the metaphor of the 'dog' evokes similar resonances of impurity and marginalization which define facets of the identity of the woman and the Dalits. This aids arguments for hermeneutical compatibility between the woman and the Dalits on the basis of a marginality based on impurity, invoked in the story through the metaphor of the 'dog'.

A Dalit Praxis-oriented Reading of the Story

The above-mentioned points provide us with clues to interpret the passage relevantly to the Dalit context. On the basis of the above clues, the following praxiological principles which can be relevant to the Dalit situation can be articulated.

Liberative Praxis as Necessarily 'Other-Initiated'

Though Mark, in contrast with Matthew, doesn't use the word 'faith', the actions of the Syrophoenician woman fit the definition of 'faith' in the context of the synoptic healing stories, namely faith as initiative and as persistence amidst obstacles. 'The focus of faith in Mark is trust that a request will be granted.'[39] The story bears testimony to the reputation of j esus which has reached the Syrophoenicians.[40] It is clear that the impetus for this faith in the healing stories is belief that j esus is the source of healing.

It is significant that in the healing stories the word faith is mentioned in conjunction with human agency. The agency of the Syrophoenician woman in the episode is hard to be missed. From a socio-cultural perspective one can also see in the woman's action a 'replication of honor in blood and kinship'. The honour codes expected blood and kinship groups 'to stick together and advance the common good of their kinship and group', through 'concerted cooperative action'.[41] The woman seeks out the secluded j esus and, though j esus rebuffs her initial request by invoking the 'powerful and degrading metaphor of dog', she persists on behalf

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[38] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 14 (n. 1).

[39] David Rhoads, 'j esus and the Syrophoenician Woman: A Narrative Critical Study', in *JAAR*, Vol. 62, No. 2, 1994 (pp. 343–75), p. 360.

[40] Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 129.

[41] Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 53.

of her daughter.[42] 'Her faith was such that it refused to be moved by the harshest of rejections even from jesus himself. jesus' affirmation of this faith functions as an affirmation of female power which was able to overcome extraordinary obstacles.'[43] In the Matthean text, the word of deliverance has to be wrested from the constrained silence of jesus. jesus' '*a-logos*' (a refusal to speak, in Matthew) can be read as an attempt at silencing the woman.[44] However, by refusing the silence he imposes, the woman overcomes the obstacle by her persistence. Thus, there is also the motif of 'impediment-overcome' in the story.

In the Markan version of the story jesus himself seems to be countering the woman, but Matthew partly transfers the motif of impediment from jesus to the disciples in his version of the story.[45] The fact that faith and impediment are 'associated motifs in the healing stories has to be taken seriously'.[46] In the stories where gentiles are mentioned, there is unusual stress given to 'the motif of resistance overcome'.[47] Despite her unnamed and doubly marginal status as a gentile and as a woman, the Syrophoenician woman shows commendable faith and initiative.[48] Though there is the articulation of clearly perceived awareness of boundaries and tensions between different cultures, the miracle stories themselves show that they are reaching out beyond socio-cultural boundaries.[49] What is significant is that although the woman seems to have grasped the marginal status accorded to her gentile identity, she overcame that impediment by approaching jesus and persisting in her demands for her daughter's liberation. Her initiative and efforts are revolutionary.[50] This has direct relevance to the Dalit situation in India because 'obstacles' of various kinds act as deterrents to praxis. Thus, it is pertinent to emphasize that faith which does not acquire the form of initiative, and persistence in overcoming boundaries, cannot always result in liberation. It is also interesting to note that the best illustration of the associated motifs 'impediment-faith', occurs where *representatives* come to jesus.[51] In a context where more people, institutions and organizations are acknowledging their role as partners in the Dalit struggle, what is needed is an empathetic-solidarity that persists until transformation is gained. Complacency and passivity thus do not fall under the ambit of faith in this context.

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[42] Malbon, 'Narrative Criticism', p. 44.

[43] Wainwright, *Towards a Feminist Critical Reading*, p. 243.

[44] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 64.

[45] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

[46] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

[47] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 254.

[48] Anderson, 'Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter', in Anderson and Moore (eds), *Mark and Method* (pp. 103–34), p. 130.

[49] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 254.

[50] Myers, *Binding*, pp. 203–4.

[51] Theissen, *The Miracle Stories*, p. 53.

From the perspective of praxis, it is pertinent to understand 'faith' in terms of cognitive functions – as persistence and as initiative. What emerges from this story and in the synoptic healing stories in general is the primacy of the role of ordinary people in effecting transformation. People's initiative and persistence are prerequisites for transformation of the Dalit situation. They are an integral aspect of praxis. Unless the motivation for change comes from the oppressed people, change cannot be achieved. With regard to the Dalit situation, the evidence of the results of persistence and people's initiative has been made manifest in many instances. For example, the two amendments in the text of the Indian Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 (popularly known as the 1950 Presidential Order), in 1956 and 1990, can be attributed to the initiatives of the civil society. This presidential order in its pre-amended form decreed that 'no person who professes a religion different from Hindu, shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste'.[52] This criterion meant that all those Dalit communities who profess non-Hindu religions like Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity, were not considered as belonging to the Scheduled Castes (which is the constitutional term for Dalit communities), and hence could not avail the benefits of positive discrimination, which the constitution extended only to Hindu Dalits. But the persistent resistance put up by the Sikh community on behalf of Dalit Sikhs resulted in the 1956 amendment of the presidential order which included Dalit Sikhs in the category of Scheduled Castes. Thus, the benefits of positive discrimination were extended to Dalit Sikhs. Similarly, in 1990, under the leadership of the then Union Minister of Welfare and Labour, Ram Vilas Paswan, 'neo-Buddhists' or Buddhists of Scheduled Caste origin (Dalits who mass-converted to Buddhism under the leadership of Ambedkar) were also given Scheduled Caste status on the grounds that 'change of religion has not altered their social and economic condition'.[53] Massey acknowledges the role of two major catalysts for this change, namely the role played by Dalit leaders such as Ram Vilas Paswan, and the 'political necessity created by the Ambedkar centenary celebration in the mind of the non-Dalit political leaders'.[54] Massey discerns in these initiatives – of resistance, protest, and committed political action backed up with 'political will'– clues to actions which will 'pave the way for the establishment of a "just society" or an "alternate society" based upon the principles of justice, equality, freedom and equity as envisaged in the preamble' of the Indian Constitution.

There is need for an 'active citizenry' in situations of inequality where the needs and interests of the minority are likely to be sidelined.[55] Recognizing the

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[52] Cited in james Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights: With Special Reference to Dalit Christians', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, june and September 2004 (pp. 1–9), p. 6.

[53] Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights', pp. 6, 7.

[54] Massey, 'Dalits and Human Rights', p. 9.

[55] Duncan B. Forrester, *On Human Worth* (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 180.

importance of an active citizenry in the transformation of society along egalitarian lines, Duncan Forrester writes:

> A democracy needs an active citizenry that is willing to put the common good before sectional and individual interests, and sometimes make sacrifices for the benefit of others, and for a greater good. Usually this is only possible when many people are gripped by a vision, and feel a sense of solidarity, shared destiny and mutual accountability. But it also depends on visionary leadership, for political leaders who have convictions which they can share and a vision, a dream, of the future of the society that is infectious, like Martin Luther King's, or Desmond Tutu's.[56]

It is significant that Forrester uses the examples of Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu. Historically, various initiatives for social-political transformation have come from within the marginalized groups. The impetus for the wider society is to affirm solidarity with such struggles. To argue that initiatives for justice emerging from the oppressed groups are self-centred is to miss the point. Dalit struggles may seem to be sectional when they are carried on by Dalits. But, given their situation of marginalization and oppression, it is a struggle for common good, for justice for all and egalitarianism. Thus, it is crucial that Dalits play a pro-active role in the process. But there is need for the wider citizenry to be involved in struggles for justice because only this can lead to effective change. Thus, the key praxiological imperative that the passage throws to us, which will be pertinent to the Dalit situation, is the need for initiative and persistence in working towards total transformation. It also implies that all possible avenues for Dalit emancipation should be utilized accordingly.

Praxis as Subverting the Politics of 'Othering'

The woman ruptures a few 'epistemes' of order and propriety where 'power' conceptually rests with jesus. The way in which jesus initially understands the woman could be attributed to the thought system which defined and labelled the 'Canaanites' in relation to a self-referential ideology of 'chosenness'. The Canaanites were, in the epistemic view of the Israelites, the impure other. The consistent association of the 'ideology of chosenness' with the 'promised land' (with its implications of the displacement of the Canaanites) – is iconic of this epistemic 'impure/pagan otherness'. One can see that this epistemology dominates the encounter between the woman and jesus. jesus, by referring to her community as dogs, seems to be reflecting this conceptual worldview in the early stages of his interaction with the woman. The function of such epistemologies is to maintain 'order'. In this particular story, the power in the 'order' rests with jesus, who is the 'Other' of the Canaanite woman – both as man and as non-gentile.

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[56] Forrester, *On Human Worth*, p. 181.

Thus, her solicitation of jesus, by encroaching upon his privacy (in Mark), is not only a demonstration of 'inappropriately assertive female behaviour', rather it is a blatant affront to jesus' honour status.[57] It can be interpreted as a blatant refusal to believe that she did not have the 'prescribed status' to approach jesus. It is a refusal to conform to her labelled status as an 'inferior' who had to show deference in approaching jesus. Her behaviour challenges in a subtle way both the conceptual as well as the social structures of relations between jesus and the woman. The result of her encounter with jesus is a disruption of the way of imaging her identity. The woman is undeterred by her labelled identity. She refuses to be ensnared by the dominant semiotics of social order.

Leticia A. Guardiola-Saenz's attempts at re-reading the Matthean version of the story from the perspective of her own subjectivity as a Mexican-American throw fresh light on the agency of the woman (though at the expense of identifying jesus as the oppressor!). Locating the encounter within the broader framework of ideology of 'chosenness', which has so far informed the assumed priority of the Israelites over the Canaanites in the text,[58] Guardiola-Saenz embarks on a re-writing of the story from the reverse of history.[59] From this angle she argues that the 'Otherness' of the woman may have been co-opted by the totalitarian voice of the author and goes with her task of articulating the 'Otherness' of the Canaanite woman on the basis of her own subjectivity. Assuming that the woman is aware of her 'dispossession', she rereads the story with a spirit of dispossession, which she assumes 'the Canaanite woman had when she approached jesus: a spirit of protest and reclamation'.[60] From this angle, the voice of the woman is the angry voice of the 'dispossessed and the rebellious' and not the 'submissive whisper of the alienated'. We need to understand that Guardiola-Saenz in her re-appropriation of the story attempts to construct her own Otherness as well as the Otherness of the Canaanite woman. But the way she reconstructs the story helps us to understand the agency of the woman from the perspective of the victims:

> She cannot and does not respect either human boundaries or divine boundaries that go against the human value of life. She breaks the boundaries of ethnicity, of the empire, of gender, of culture and speaks for her daughter …. She represents to jesus the wide world outside of the empire, the need of those who are oppressed

57 Myers, *Binding*, pp. 203, 204.

58 Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 70.

59 Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 74. What she helps the readers to see is whether the first event 'could have been misread by the author by his insistence on a totalitarian voice'. From this angle she raises questions which help us to focus on the 'Otherness' of the woman rather than seeing her under the totalitarian lenses: 'What if the Canaanite woman was aware of her dispossession? What if she was not begging jesus for a favour but demanding restitution? What if she was not worshipping jesus but defying him? What if I really recast the story?'

60 Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 69.

> by the empire. The Canaanite woman reclaims respectful treatment as Other under what she supposes is the new reign of equality: the βασιλεια, which has come to break the empires. Confronted with such a declaration of confidence and self-affirmation, witnessing the emergence of the Canaanite woman as his dialectic Other, jesus can do no other than respond positively to the woman's request. jesus understands her demand and moves back from what he thought was his mission to give the woman the place that she deserves at the table.[61]

Ranjini Rebera, who analyses the story from a South Asian feminist perspective, finds resonances between the Syrophoenician woman's behaviour and modern South Asian women's refusal to accept rejection on grounds of impurity.[62] Rebera also interprets the woman's voice as power and relates it to the problem of gender-stereotyping and repressive socialization where women's voices are suppressed. In such contexts, the woman's discourse with jesus has an emancipatory impulse, since her actions understood from a South Asian feminist perspective would be 'unwomanly'. Thus, the encounter can be understood as subversion of stereotypes.[63] The woman is posited as an icon for women today to claim the right to power, and is commended for her ability to use the ' "power" of the weak' in a positive and life-giving manner.[64] Understood from the Syrophoenician woman's perspective as an 'under dog' (literally!), an attack on conventional social codes constitutes an important part of the cultural ideology of marginalized groups because such social codes function as epistemological tools, which are used by the dominant groups to shape the marginal groups and sustain and perpetuate the status quo.

Pertinent parallels can be drawn between the actions of the woman crossing the boundaries of social semiotics and the cultural ideology of the Dalits. Dalit thinkers (as has been already pointed out) have, as part of their process of liberation, considered constant attacks and conscious infringement of the semiotics of caste-order as an important component of their counter-ideology. Certain symbolic manifestations of this aspect of Dalit ideology has been the public burning of copies of the laws of Manu by Dalit ideologists. Such actions derive from the realization on the part of Dalit thinkers that the strength which discrimination against the Dalits derives from the Hindu scriptures is 'the symbolic potency of such texts to define reality and represent the squalid and miserable conditions of the "polluted" Dalits as natural and consistent with a *dharmaic* order'.[65] Similarly, we should pay particular attention to the example of Periyar E.V. Ramasami, popularly known as Periyar, who was founder of the Dravidian Movement (*Dravida* Kazhagam) of Tamil Nadu. Periyar was a *Shudra*, non-Dalit 'low-caste' who launched a

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61 Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', pp. 78, 79.

62 Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman', p. 105.

63 Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman', p. 105.

64 Rebera, 'The Syrophoenician Woman', p. 107.

65 Schwartz, 'Indian Untouchables Texts of Resistance (pp. 177–91).

vociferous attack on Brahminic/Priestly religion. S. Robertson gives us details of the highly symbolic content of Periyar's vehement attacks:

> During 1927–28, he campaigned for burning the Manu Dharma Shastra and in 1942, for burning Ramayana and Periya Puranam. In 1953 he broke images of Vinayaka (Ganesha). Periyar and his followers burned parts of the Indian constitution in 1957 because it encourages the caste system. In the same year there was a great attempt to remove the title 'Brahmin' from hotel name boards. In 1960 Periyar burned pictures of Rama. In 1971 Periyar organized a superstition eradication conference in Salem. In this conference Rama's image was taken in the procession and was beaten by sandals. Hindu deities were obscenely portrayed. The effigy of Rama was burned publicly. Posters revealing the lust of and birth of Hindu deities were found everywhere. Many other photos depicted naked idols and erotic scenes from mythology.[66]

Such actions have a deep, though often always polemic, emancipatory meaning. Here Periyar's intention was to make people disrespect and disregard Hindu scriptures, which he considered had functioned as tools to enslave the so-called 'lower-castes'. These actions have to be understood as overt rejection of the authority of Hindu scriptures and Hindu Gods and a refusal to allow them any 'normative-superiority'. Such visible affront dismantles all associated sacrosanct perceptions, which have so far inured the non-Brahmins to their ascribed inferiority. These are public symbolic acts. I am not advocating the propriety of such sort of resistive and subversive strategies per se, rather my point is to draw attention to one notion that exists among anti-caste groups – that liberation from the enslaving tendencies of the caste-system is also linked with repudiating the validity and sacrosanct status ascribed to religious texts, icons and beliefs which reinforce and reiterate the 'normativity' or even the 'sacrality' of caste-discrimination. I agree with the quintessence of this dimension of anti-caste praxis, while maintaining that the *manifest content* that this repudiation should take must not lead to further animosity and polarization.

But not all of what the woman does can be outrightly classified as overt resistance. There are certain aspects in the story where the woman is portrayed as conforming to the code of social semiotics. Employing the titular address, 'Lord, Son of David' signifies the woman as one who accepts the pre-eminence of j esus.[67] In the grammar of patron-client relationships the woman's petitions for mercy can be characterized as 'a client's request for special "favour" or benefaction'.[68] Here we find the twin elements of submissiveness and defiance that constitute subaltern mentality being

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66 S. Robertson, 'Periyar E.V. Ramasami's Critique of Priestly Hinduism and its Implications for Social Reforms', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos 2 and 3, j une and September 2004 (pp. 10–29), p. 23.

67 Guardiola-Saenz, 'Borderless Women and Borderless Texts', p. 75.

68 Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, p. 135.

acted out by the woman.[69] From this perspective, I am of the opinion that the woman's response to jesus' initial harsh verbal reply reflects a subtly-nuanced refusal to accept jesus' position of referring to her as a 'dog' and rejecting her needs. Though it seems as if the woman herself has internalized the quintessence of her identity in terms of 'dog-ness', in fact what her reply reflects is that she understands it more in terms of 'where jesus is from', i.e. jesus' own perspective as an Israelite male. A simpler interpretation of her words would mean, 'Yes, that is what you think, but can't you see those in need outside your own people'. The resistive element in her reply is that she seems relatively unperturbed by how jesus labels her, in comparison with her own restlessness to acquire healing for her daughter. It seems as if she has downplayed the 'seriousness' of jesus' words. This is very much along the lines of what Gerald West calls as ritualisms of subordination:

> Among the strategies of resistance the poor and marginalized have forged in the face of domination are: first, the establishment of a safe sequestered site offstage, behind the backs of the dominant forces in society, where they are able to articulate and act out a hidden transcript of defiance and affirm their dignity and second, an insertion of resisting forms of discourse into the public realm which assert their presence ... with reference to the second strategy ... subordinate groups have typically learned to clothe their resistance and defiance in ritualisms of subordination that serve both to disguise their purposes and to provide them with a ready route of retreat that may soften the consequences of possible failure. The dominant discourse, becomes then, a plastic idiom or dialect that is capable of carrying an enormous variety of meanings, including those that are subversive of their use as intended by the dominant.[70]

Liberative Praxis as Learning from the Other

I agree with David Rhoads who argues that the encounter of jesus with the Syrophoenician woman facilitated a genuine change of mind in jesus. This is one occasion in Mark where we get the picture of jesus losing an argument, and more significantly to someone who is not only a foreigner but also a woman.[71]

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[69] Gautam Bhadra, 'The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharma', in Ranajit Guha, (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 5. Cited in Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 130.

[70] Gerald West, 'Disguising Defiance in Ritualisms of Subordination: Literary and Community-Based Resources for Recovering Resistance Discourse Within the Dominant Discourses of the Bible', in Gary A. Philips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran (eds), *Reading Communities Reading Scripture* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002) (pp. 194–217), p.197.

[71] Bryan Christopher, *A Preface to Mark: Notes on the Gospel and its Literary and Cultural Settings* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 97.

The consequence of this encounter of wits is that j esus ‘relents from his initial reluctance to help the woman and pronounces her daughter free of the demon’.[72] j esus who begins the scene with the assumption that ‘the Kingdom is for the j ews now and only later for the Gentiles … ends the scene with a willingness for the gentiles to benefit significantly from the kingdom even now’.[73] Meyer’s comment helps us to understand the story as an example of status equalization:

> j esus allows himself to be ‘shamed’ (becoming ‘least’) in order to include this pagan woman in the new community of the kingdom; so too j udaism will have to suffer the indignity of redefining its group boundaries (collective honor) in order to realize that gentiles are now welcomed as equals.[74]

Understood in this light, the praxiological implications of this example of j esus provocatively posit various challenges for the Indian Churches. First is the humility for dominant groups to suffer the ‘indignity’ of redefinition of group boundaries. In a context where Churches can degenerate into caste-based ghettoes, welcoming the ‘Other’ as an equal can be a disturbing irruption. Pheme Perkins is of the opinion that ‘this story challenges Christians to examine how they treat “gentile”, persons from other racial or ethnic background in their midst’.[75]

From another angle, the story presents the paradigm of j esus as a teachable man. It portrays j esus as one who doesn’t absolutize his own assumptions. He is willing to learn from the woman and re-image his identity as necessary. j apanese feminist theologian Hisako Kinukawa identifies j esus in Mark as one, who, ‘having spent his whole life in the culture of honour/shame which was fully male-oriented, and which expected women to bear all the shame … did not take initiative until women prepared him by stages to break down the boundaries’. Kinukawa is of the opinion that the woman’s effort is motivational and persuasive in enlarging j esus’ ministry to encompass gentiles. I agree with her in identifying the woman as one among those who ‘led j esus to become a responding “boundary breaker”’.[76] Another writer, Sharon H. Ringe, dealing with the Markan version of the story, also draws our attention to the women’s ministry *to* j esus.[77] Using the language of gifts, Ringe says that the syrophoenician woman ‘seems to have enabled him to act in a way apparently blocked to him before. Her wit, her sharp retort, was indeed her gift to j esus – a gift that enabled his gift of healing in turn, her ministry that

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72 Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 117.

73 Rhoads, ‘j esus and the Syrophoenician Woman’, p. 360.

74 Myers, *Binding*, p. 204.

75 Pheme Perkins, ‘The Gospel of Mark’, in *NIB*, Vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) (pp. 609–733), p. 611.

76 Kinukawa, *Women and Jesus in Mark*, p. 139.

77 Sharon H. Ringe, ‘A Gentile Woman’s Story’, in Letty M. Russel (ed.), *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), (pp. 65–72).

opened up the possibility of his'.[78] Here jesus himself must learn about being that sort of Christ from one of the poorest of the poor and most despised of the outcast … her gifts and her ministry become the vehicle of the gospel to jesus and to us.[79] From this angle we gain a perception of the agency to the woman in helping jesus to respond to the situation differently. The woman's act enables jesus to become a channel of the redeeming presence of God in the situation because her dialogue with him facilitates a new insight to the situation.[80] jesus emerges from the conversation as 'a finally teachable man' who has gained new insights on the meaning of his 'messiahship'.[81]

The image of jesus as a 'teachable man' holds ethical imperative in contexts where there is a reluctance to learn from the other. One example can be found in what Kancha Illaiah calls as 'intellectual untouchability'.[82] While writing with 'passionate anger', about how 'a mind that is trained in the domain of the spiritual fascist culture like that of Hindu culture never appreciates the discoveries of its adversaries', Illaiah says:

> The brahmanic Hindus treat even the books written by Dalitbahujans as untouchable. Historically, not only the Dalit body but also books written by Dalit and OBC scholars remain untouchable. That was the reason why untouchability has been imposed on Ambedkar's theoretical writings for a long time in India. Intellectual untouchability was/is more dangerous than physical untouchability. The Dalitbahujan life has not been allowed to figure in school textbooks. Their writings were not rejected with a critical assessment but were rejected with mere contempt even before reading.[83]

In such contexts, the challenge is for the dominant to be open to the challenges posed by Dalit academia. Even within the churches there is need for the dominant to be open to the voices of the marginalized and unlearn some traditional attitudes which stress on the identity of Dalits as 'inferior'.

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78 Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', p. 72.

79 Ringe, 'A Gentile Woman's Story', p. 72.

80 Ringe, 'A Gentile Women's Story', p. 71.

81 See Wainwright's revised treatment of the story in 'A Voice from the Margin: Reading Mathew 15.21–28 in an Australian Feminist Key', in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (eds), *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, II (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1995) (pp. 132–53). Ringe revised her version in 'A Gentile Woman's Story, Revisited', in Amy-jill Levine and Marianne Blickenstaff (eds), *A Feminist Companion to Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) (pp. 79–100), p. 99.

82 Illaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu*, p. 141.

83 Illaiah, *Why I am not a Hindu*, p. 143.

Praxis as Refusal to be Othered

On the basis of the analysis of Theissen, the Syrophoenician woman can be understood as being dominant especially in the way she is represented as an affluent, Hellenistic citizen of a city which was oppressive towards the Galileans. Understood from this angle, can we understand the woman's solicitation of j esus as representing a 'desperate fetishizing of the spiritual power of the weak who are otherwise despised in everyday life'? Can j esus' refusal of the woman's request be understood as 'an act of resistance to yet one more appropriation of the resources of the oppressed by the powerful'?[84] Instances where the dominant communities find something worth appropriating from the marginalized communities whom they otherwise despise and oppress can be found even in the Indian caste situation. One important occupation of some major Dalit communities in India, like the *Paraiyars* in Tamil Nadu and *Madigas* in Andhra Pradesh, is funeral drumming. It is a 'forced labour thrust on Dalits' and usually the renumeration they receive is a pittance, and sometimes only arrack or toddy to drink.[85] The role of the funeral drummers is considered as irreplaceable even for the funerals of the dominant castes.[86] Because of their indispensability as funeral drummers, the upper-caste people 'are said to entice the Paraiyar drummers with "more money and more rice" so that they do not reject this important ritual component of the caste funerals'.[87] There have been various ways in which Dalits have shown resistance to this sort of appropriation of their resources by upper castes. Dalit communities along with social activists in Tamil Nadu have considered 'collective resistance by withholding the services of drummers for caste funerals' on the basis that funeral drumming reinforced stereotypes of Dalits as impure and inferior. One consequence of this was that it enabled the drummers to increase their bargaining power and fee for their performance.[88]

In course of an ethnographic field research in *Thondan Thulasi* village of Tamil Nadu, I came across an incident where a community of Dalit Christians broke their drums and gave up funeral drumming because it symbolized that the Dalits were

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[84] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 68.

[85] Godwin Shiri, 'The Wide Prevalence of Traditional Occupations Among Christian Dalits – A Sign of Continued Oppression', in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 42, No. 2, j une 1995 (pp. 25–37), p. 29.

[86] This is because drumming at funerals is believed to a) 'bid and contain the spirit of the dead person', which is believed to hover around the house awaiting an opportunity to occupy some familiar person or place, and guide it to the cemetery – the 'space destined for the spirits of the dead', and b) keep other demons/malevolent spirits away. Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, pp. 116, 117.

[87] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 116.

[88] Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 135 (n. 40).

'impure'.[89] Though initially it resulted in tensions between the Hindu and Christian Dalits, the matter was resolved when it was agreed that funeral drumming gave them a resource on which the upper castes were dependent. Further, as the agency for deciding to play or not lay with the Dalits, drumming gave them a resource on the basis of which negotiations between Dalits and non-Dalits could take place.[90] The modes of resistance differ. In situations where the Dalits are in economically 'stable' positions independent of the upper castes, they can refuse to play or even make a 'symbolic break' from the profession (like the Dalit Christians of *Thondan Thulasi*), in other contexts 'bargaining' can be a mode of protest. Nevertheless, the point is that the Dalits recognize their indispensability and agency in the situation and appropriate them in a way they consider beneficial.

Praxis as Necessarily Other-Engagement: From 'Missioning to' to 'Missioning with'

Another important point for Christian praxis which emerges from the passage is that the passage cannot be understood as merely j esus' mission *to* the woman. It is also a story where the woman and j esus engage *with* each other to secure healing for another. Both are joined in a solidarity of compassion and their mission is carried on mutually and procedurally. The praxiological impetus which emerges from the passage is – to 'Mission *with*' the various others.

In the Markan version of the story we can see that the word of liberation emerges from the woman and not j esus. j esus himself acknowledges the value of her words. On his part he seems to just confirm the miracle. Using post-colonial discourse theory, j im Perkinson in his analysis of the passage raises an important question: in a context where there seems to be a messianic word that is not simply j esus' own, 'how are we to interpret a word of saving deliverance when it is spoken against the Word of saving deliverance?'[91] Perkinson's concern is the strategic denial of soteriological value to the woman's voice. He finds in the Markan text evidence for a 'minute disruption in the witness of the gospel to j esus as the entire locus of salvation'. He brings out the 'peculiar undecidability' associated in situations where the liberating word emerges from the other:

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[89] Another reason for this reaction by Christian Dalits can also be attributed to the fact that most Christians in the area were employed as technicians and factory workers in institutions and medium-scale industries in the nearby towns. Hence they were facing upward economic mobility, which meant that they had concrete-roofed houses, some better than non-dalits. Their children also attended English-medium schools in the nearby towns. However, in the village they were still considered as inferior, which they assumed was because some Dalits continued in funeral drumming.

[90] However, for the Dalits who worked as labourers in the fields owned by upper-caste landowners this was a difficult situation.

[91] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 63.

> On the one hand, it represents a word of the 'not-Christ' that begs to be embraced by Christians as a 'christic' word. But it does so solely on the basis of its *performance* and not in its credentials or claim of identification with Christianity. On the other, to the degree such an intervention effects a 'real' moment of deliverance or healing, it cannot be entirely screened off discursively as somehow absolutely different from the salvation associated with Christ. Its value may be soteriological even though its author is not clearly j esus.[92]

One can neither appropriate the salvific word from the other as 'a form of anonymous Christianity' nor entirely differentiate it as 'other'. Rather, the challenge which the pericope throws is 'to struggle to read and act alongside of those others in pursuit of words of hope and healing wherever such are spoken'.[93] The call in this passage is to work with others who are involved in similar agendas of justice and liberation. The dialogical model of mission which emerges is pertinent as a typology for the Indian Church.

There have been tendencies to interpret this passage to fit into the salvation history theme of Christian mission to the 'gentiles'. One should be cautious in interpreting this story as a mandate of the Church to evangelize the 'gentiles'. There is little evidence in the passage to suggest that j esus' mission to the woman leads to her conversion. She doesn't become a follower of j esus after the healing. j esus recognizes the woman's need as an end in itself, and not a means to his own end. Dube [94] and Pui-lan[95] pay attention to the religious difference of the woman when interpreting the passage – she does not become the object of j esus' evangelism. Pui-lan points to a reading which offers scope for inter-religious dialogue which recognizes the otherness of other faiths. These readings, while allowing space for interfaith dialogue, pose a constructive critique to all proselytizing tendencies.

An ecclesiocentric reading of this passage has the potential to deter 'any meaningful dialogue' with members of other faiths.[96] The history of Indian Christianity has shown that very often Dalits have been branded as 'rice-christians'. Christian missions have never been unambiguously free from the temptation of considering the Dalit situation of deprivation as an opportunity for proselytism. The primacy of 'spiritual liberation' over 'material and physical liberation' has been emphasized to validate this position. One practical implication of such an attitude is the estrangement of the Christian Church from secular organizations involved in the Dalit cause on the basis that the mission of the Church is 'qualitatively different' from the mission of secular organizations. Thus, while appropriating the

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92 Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 82.

93 Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 82.

94 Musa W. Dube, 'Readings of *Semoya*: Batswana Women's Interpretations of Matthew 15:21–28', in *Semeia*, Vol. 73, 1996 (pp. 111–30).

95 Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

96 R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'The Syrophoenician Woman', in *Expository Times*, Vol. 98, October 1986 (pp. 13–15), p. 14.

passage for the Dalit situation, it is important to acknowledge that the imperative emerging from the passage is to ‘mission *with*’ rather than to ‘mission *to*’ (mission understood in the sense of proselytism).

The challenge of working with the ‘Other’ which emerges from the passage offers us theological impetus, which can be translated as the co-operation of the Church with secular organizations, whose understanding of mission is different from the Church’s. ‘In the challenging task of empowerment of Dalits – including Dalit Christians – all possible alliances should be formed with other like-minded movements and groups irrespective of whether they are religious or secular; Dalit or non-Dalit’.[97] The Telugu Dalit Christian poet Gurram j ashuva also appealed to various religious traditions and ideologies like Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Humanism to ‘bring together the liberative visions and values from their scriptures and to share their spiritualities towards building a new humanity knit together by God’s love, justice and peace’.[98]

Praxis as Consensual Model of Justice

If one looks for a ‘concept of justice’ in the story, it can be found in the fact that both j esus and the woman dialogue about their ‘rights’ and critique the other. If we understand the story accepting Theissen’s socio-historical picture of colonial economic relations, we can see both j esus and the woman engaged in the question of justice. j esus puts forth his argument for his solidarity with the Galilean peasants. j esus is concerned about the Galileans who have scarce food to live on and critically reveals the dominant relationship of the Tyrians over the j ews through his words.[99] Against the background of the economic relations between the Galilean peasantry and the regions of Tyre and Sidon, j esus words could mean: ‘First let the poor people in the j ewish rural areas be satisfied. For it is not good to take the poor people’s food and throw it to the rich gentiles in the cities’.[100] From the woman’s angle, she seeks ‘to defend the “rights” of her people to the liberating power of j esus’ exorcism ministry’.[101] The woman brings to j esus’ attention her own representation of reality. While she helps expose the arbitrariness of the ‘chosen’ ideology and counters j esus’ claim to exclusivity,[102] she on her part shows perceptivity to the prevailing asymmetries and clearly distances herself from the oppressive traders. By acknowledging herself also as one in need she identifies

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[97] Godwin Shiri, ‘People’s Movements: An Introspection as we Enter the 21st Century’, in *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, No. IX, March and j une 1996, p. 129.

[98] Prabhakar, ‘Women and Gender Equality’, p. 47.

[99] Kinukawa, ‘The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman’, p. 52.

[100] Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*, p. 75. Cited in Perkinson, ‘A Canaanitic Word’, p. 67.

[101] Myers, *Binding*, p. 204.

[102] Rebera, ‘The Syrophoenician Woman’, p. 106.

herself not with the oppressive traders who benefit from the bread that is 'snatched' away from the children to whom it belongs, rather she stresses her desire to be included in the household, where surplus food is shared and, more importantly in this context, where no one is deprived. From j esus' statement she discerns j esus' concern for the 'others' in Galilee. While, 'She acknowledges the primacy that the Galilean peasants ought to have', at the same time she also awakens j esus to recognize her among the 'others' in the society of Tyre.[103] Her plea is for 'j esus to be consistent in putting the primacy of the marginalized wherever they are and showing an egalitarian spirit toward those who are destitute'.[104] The woman challenges j esus on the basis of his own convictions of the primacy of the needy. The verbal riposte of the woman to j esus' response to her initial pleas provides the strategic twist to the story. The woman's response is in the form of 'a reiteration that contests j esus' words in the name of his own iterated values'.[105] In order to leverage his refusal of the woman's request, j esus invokes the 'little ones': 'it is not right to take what children need and – while they are still hungry – give it to "dogs"'. As a response, by deploying the image against the content, the woman capitalizes on the positive valuation given to children and presses forth the cause of her own child.[106] The woman creates what seems like 'solidarity in littleness' by linking up puppies (which is the literal meaning of the word j esus used for dogs) with the diminutives for crumbs and children.[107] In the process she 'opens up room for her own daughter in the privileged position he (j esus) accords to the most vulnerable'.[108] She is also a needy person and, in the same way that j esus identifies himself in solidarity with the destitute Galilean peasants, she wants j esus to be benevolent towards her and address her need.

It is obvious that at the end of her brief encounter of challenge and riposte with j esus there is a subversion of her assumed identity. The favourable reply that j esus gives her is now affirmative. There is a reversal of equilibrium of power.[109] The good news of the story is that by conceding to her request and healing her daughter j esus confirms their status as 'children'. In Pokorny's words 'the puppy became a child'.[110] By attributing the reason for his change of stance to her 'words', j esus

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[103] Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 52.

[104] Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', pp. 52, 53.

[105] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 75.

[106] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 75.

[107] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', pp. 75, 76.

[108] Perkinson, 'A Canaanitic Word', p. 76.

[109] Kinukawa, 'The Story of the Syro-Phoenician Woman', p. 53.

[110] P. Pokorny, 'From Puppy to the Child: Some Problems of Contemporary Biblical Exegesis Demonstrated from Mark 7:24–30/Matt 15.21–8', in *NTS*, Vol. 41, 1995 (pp. 321–7), p. 327.

acknowledges her agency in the transformation. She acts boldly and is rewarded by jesus.[111] She actually wins jesus over.[112]

One can discern a persuasive and consensual model of justice in the story. What we are looking at is similar to 'what Habermas calls as the "ideal speech situation" in which no one is inhibited by fear of threat or status from sharing fully in the search for agreement and in which each participant may introduce any considerations desired'.[113] Forrester in his analysis of Habermas points out that Habermas' 'community of discourse in the ideal speech situation is in a real sense a model of what justice means'. According to Forrester:

> A just society is one in which there is minimum of coercion and the maximum of attentiveness to what each person and group has to contribute and to say, a society where manipulation and ideological control are systematically discountenanced, where people are able to relate freely and openly to one another, where people learn to speak the truth in love.[114]

According to Forrester, though unarticulated, these features are implicit in Habermas. The interaction between the woman and jesus has this kind of a situation, involving participation and dialogue. All elements of coercion are gradually minimized and attentiveness to the other is maximized. Both emerge as transformed subjects. Through the process of dialogue their identities have been re-imaged and re-understood. The important lesson that they both learn from their encounter is 'priority for the needy'. Seen from the angle of the researcher, it is a story where the barriers of ethnicity, gender, region and religion are broken, exclusivity is questioned and justice is redefined as attitudes are transformed. This model of justice, as consensual and procedural, can be paradigmatic in the caste-context where the rights, desires, afflictions and aspirations of all are shared and communities decide consensually, with minimum coercion, appropriate manifestations of justice. This involves the willingness of both groups to listen to each other and consider the other's voice seriously. There is sufficient impetus in this interpretation for engaging with the other in the struggle for wholeness.

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[111] Anderson, 'Feminist Criticism: The Dancing Daughter', p. 131.

[112] Pokorny, 'From Puppy to the Child', p. 328.

[113] Duncan B. Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 171.

[114] Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, p. 173.

Implications for Dalit Theology: Towards Re-imagining the Other and Re-configuring Dalit Praxis

The Other within the Other: Hybrid Identity[115]

Having trawled through the various interpretations of the story, one should note that there is an ambiguity in the way the woman's identity is represented. The various interlocutors of her identity, namely race, gender, ethnicity, economic status place her 'simultaneously at the boundaries of the privileged and the marginalized'.[116] Drawing attention to the presence of 'the Other within the Other', Kwok Pui-lan cautions against a reductionist approach in appropriating the identity of the Syrophoenician woman:

> We may be tempted to identify with her Otherness as a racial minority, as a woman or as the contemporary marginalized, without recognizing our own privileges and our own potential to exploit others. The Other is never a homogenous group, there is always the Other within the Other.[117]

Attention to the aspect of 'the Other within the Other', though important, is often a neglected aspect of Dalit Theology. A uni-dimensional view – of caste communities as the dominant, and Dalit communities as the dominated – has predominantly influenced much of Dalit theology. The ambiguity and possibilities which hybrid identities posit have not been fully analysed or sufficiently appropriated by Dalit theologians. This is one reason why much of Dalit theology has been articulated focused on binarism. Post-colonial theory helps us to recognize hybridity as a reality and work through this hybridity.

Illaiah, a secular Dalitbahujan ideologist and political theorist, staunchly proposes that focusing on the binarism between Hindu caste-communities and Dalitbahujan alone can provide the appropriate methodology to subvert the hegemonic influences of caste Hinduism.[118] Responding to criticism about the problems with such 'notions of binary opposition', Illaiah writes:

> Those who are uncomfortable with the 'notions of binary opposition' would only end up in more and more confusion. The notion of what they call multi-dimensionality is capable of producing and reproducing Brahminism in each sphere, and there would not be any major opposition to its hegemony. The Dalitbahujan strength lies in locating the core of binary existences. Those Dalitbahujan scholars who let themselves be confused for three thousand years

115 Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

116 Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 75.

117 Pui-lan, *Discovering the Bible*, p. 82.

118 Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu*. See chapters on 'On being an Un-Hindu Indian', 'Dalitization not Hinduization'.

> by falling into the trap of multidimensionality could never set a theoretical agenda of their own till Ambedkar came on the scene. He saw binaries through the prism of caste in Indian history as Marx saw the binaries in the west through the prism of class.[119]

I agree that focusing on binarism can give a suitable methodological framework that can free Dalit culture from the reification of 'inferiority' imposed on it by caste Hinduism, because it has the potential to 'rudely awaken' caste Hindu consciousness to the 'reality' of the oppressive, dehumanizing and exploitative aspects of its religion, as understood by the Dalitbahujans on the basis of their subjective experiences. This inordinate accentuation of the positive dimensions of Dalit culture can also help to balance the 'history of vilification' directed against the Dalits.[120]

However, I am sceptical about the potential of the bipolar methodology to move beyond ideological and theological ghettoization. Also the blind spot of this foundational bipolarity is the lack of perceptivity (probably a deliberate methodological stance) to recognize the points of intersection between the Dalits and caste-Hindus.[121] We also need to question whether the argument for stereotyping one religion or culture as the ideal while polarizing its 'Other' antithetically, can be sustained on the basis of empirical analysis. On this Sathianathan Clarke queries as follows:

> While such constructions may facilitate the morale of a particular community, whether this is ever true of social life in any setting is quite another question. In many ways the foundational bipolarity model advances an essentialist dialectic which construes essence as always appearing in binary forms. However, the further suggestion that these binary representations do take on such neat communitarian dualisms is highly debatable. Any discerning student of Indian society would have to contend with the random, arbitrary and ambiguous manifestations of meritorious and degenerate beliefs and practices in all sections of human community i.e., Dalit and Caste alike.[122]

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119 Illaiah, *Why I am Not a Hindu*, pp. 151, 152.

120 Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', p. 39.

121 In his critique of such foundational bipolarity Clarke says:'The most serious problem with the foundational bipolarity model has to do with recent rejections of structural and substantive dualism. In spite of the geographical and social world that divide the Dalits from the Caste communities, one cannot be blind to numerous ways in which these two communities interact economically, socially and politically. The relation between the two religions is no doubt restricted by many injunctions and conventions; and yet there are points at which they intersect'. Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', p. 38.

122 Clarke, 'Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain', pp. 38, 39.

As we have already pointed out, Dalit theologians, more often than not, have exhibited a tendency to focus on the identity of the Dalits only as 'victims of the caste-system'. They have maintained relative oblivion to the aspect of Dalits as 'oppressors', within the reality of intra-Dalit hierarchy. Internal Dalit hierarchy and divisions between Dalits have often been critiqued by Dalit theologians, not on the basis of their 'ontological wrongness' (which definitively characterizes Dalit critique of the caste-system), but on the basis of their functional demerits, i.e. on the basis that such intra-Dalit divisions thwart Dalit solidarity and the possibility of a 'unified' Dalit front, which is a strong resource for Dalit struggles.

One way in which Dalits and non-Dalits can work with each other is to recognize the soft boundaries that exist between Dalits and non-Dalits. The Indian caste system is so complex that in spite of cardinal differences there are points of inter-relatedness between the religious world of the caste-communities and Dalit communities. Dalit religion cannot be glorified 'as being completely independent of and, thus, at all points contradictory to caste Hinduism'. Though the binary structure of opposition, 'of subject-object, foreign-native, colonizer-colonized, self-other, and Hindu-Dalit', is useful to analytically dissect the problem, it seldom does 'justice to the complexity of the relationship between caste Hindu and Dalit religion'.[123]

Abraham Ayrookuzhiel has pointed out interesting possibilities that this type of inter-relatedness holds for Dalit praxis. One the basis of a study based in the South Indian state of *Kerala*, Ayrookuzhiel notes that in the course of historical developments, Dalits and caste-Hindus have 'a number of religious commonalities … in the form of common god symbols, common religious festivals, common places of worship, common rituals and common places of pilgrimages'.[124] On the basis of this commonality, he proposes an interesting typology for praxis, which 'takes advantage' of such relationality:

> it is sufficiently clear that the religious heritage of the dalits is something which is acceptable to the caste Hindus though it challenges them. We have to give visibility to the challenge lest they continue to subordinate them in a traditional manner. Such a challenge will bring about the necessary pressure for a second Hindu renaissance. Since Dalit tradition is historically bound up with the caste Hindu tradition it will not be easy to resist the pressure from inside. Here the dalits are asking for change as insiders. Given the political weightage of the dalit community in India it will be difficult for the caste Hindu to resist their demands. A process of change in this way will be in the spirit of dialogue of religions.[125]

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123 Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, p. 126.

124 Ayrookuzhiel, 'A Proposal', p. 23.

125 Ayrookuzhiel, 'A Proposal', p. 28.

In the Dalit theological context, and especially when the researcher is sympathetic to 'the Dalit' cause, it is easy to opt for a hermeneutic of binarism and homogeneity. The problem with this hermeneutics is that it is antithetical to the one important dimension of the purpose of Dalit theology, which is the breaking down of structural boundaries. Moreover, the consequences of such hermeneutics can be further estrangement rather than the constructive possibility of engagement. We can even argue that Dalit theology through its ideology of binarism has the potential to replicate-in-reverse the attitudes it seeks to subvert. Its potential to curtail dialogical interaction and mutual interdependence between various communities implies that it is not the way forward to a society marked by the cessation of hostility and hatred.

Engaging with the 'Other'

The mutual interaction between the woman and jesus provides us a key to the hermeneutical appropriation of the passage with a praxis-oriented thrust. One should not ignore the reciprocity involved in the miracle. Both jesus and the Syrophoenician woman received and learned something from the interaction.[126] 'The Syrophoenician woman rattled the exclusive ethnic zones erected around communities at the time. In her persistence and assertive dialogue with jesus, she not only got her daughter restored to life but also helped jesus to broaden his particularistic and culture-bound understanding of people who were outside the jewish fold.'[127]

Both the woman and jesus have indispensable value in the story. The woman needed jesus, she recognized him as the source of healing. However, in the process of her engaging with jesus, she helped jesus to gain new insights into the nature of his mission. Seen from any angle, the challenge is for mutual co-operation. Points of convergence allow for people to work together and it is important to identify those convergent theological trajectories. In the story of the Syrophoenician woman the convergent matrices which unite the woman and jesus in a common purpose are the primacy of the needy, and pro-active passion for the deprived. But only through a process of interaction and dialogue do they recognize these aspects of convergence. Thus, the story can be praxiologically appropriated as a prototype for identifying convergent trajectories which can unify different communities and groups in a commonality of purpose. Mutual openness and willingness to learn from the 'Other' is key to the transformation of caste-relationships and emancipation of Dalits. The paradigm of jesus who is clearly open to learning from the Other is the paradigm that holds pertinence for the Dalits and non-Dalits to learn from mutual interaction.

This story is not only about the widening of jesus' understanding of his own mission, nor of the inclusive nature of jesus' mission, but also about jesus'

126 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 237.

127 Sugirtharajah, *The Bible*, p. 238.

willingness to learn and change in his interaction with someone who doesn't share the same religious and ethnic orientation as his. Learning from the 'Others' and engaging with the 'Others' have definite praxiological implications for Christian involvement in the Dalit struggle. It can be translated as a call to many groups and organizations to engage with one another – the Church to engage with secular organizations, Christians with non-Christians, Dalits with non-Dalit Christians etc. There are a lot of 'Others' in Dalit theology. The 'Others' are the non-Christian Dalits, secular organizations, non-Dalits, and non-Dalit theologies. Dalit theology has to take into serious consideration the prospects of a dialogical engagement with these 'Others' to be effective in its praxis.

One of the main challenges of Dalit theology is that it lacks sufficient theological impetus to learn from the non-Dalits. I understand that any proposal to open itself fully to non-Dalit influences is fraught with its own risks, not the least being the legitimate fear of theological co-option and ideological subsumation. This was the reason why Nirmal pointed out the need for 'methodological exclusivism' in the way Dalit theology is articulated. j . j ayakiran Sebastian, upon an analysis of the different strands of A.P. Nirmal's writings, locates Nirmal's desire for methodological exclusivism within Nirmal's quest for relationality at various levels and various issues and themes. Pointing to Nirmal's call for a movement 'away from the idea of imperial unity … to relationality that will respect the integrity and differences of many and yet keep them related to each other', Sebastian points out:

> This raises the question as to whether Nirmal meant that one ought to move in the direction of some kind of reconciliatory theology, or whether Nirmal was setting forth yet another challenge before us – that of creatively exploring the inter-relationship and interaction between Dalit theology and other forms of theologizing, as well as between Dalit and other communities, including those communities whose present 'status' was achieved, at least in part, through the use and abuse of Dalit peoples.[128]

Sebastian's conclusion is that Nirmal's call is for 'a recognition of the ambivalence of all inter-relationality, where the process of creative exploration is not content to set attainable goals, but rather to recognize that the ongoing quest for informed relationality is itself the goal'. Though Nirmal's search for theological relationality is fraught with ambiguity and is not as straightforward as his call for methodological exclusivism, Dalit theology should overcome its theological ghettoization and explore the liberative dimensions of other non-Dalit theologies.

Theologians have cautiously probed the question of the need for Dalits and non-Dalits to engage with one another. In his article 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', K.C. Abraham points to two tasks which lie ahead for Dalit theology. The first concerns the solidarity of Christian Dalits with Dalits of other religious

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[128] j . j ayakiran Sebastian, 'Creative Exploration: Arvind P. Nirmal's Ongoing Contribution to Christian Theology', in *BTF*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, December 1999 (pp. 44–52), p. 48.

orientation.[129] The other task he mentions is located within an overarching vision 'to evolve a pluriform community which allows different identities to flourish'. His concern pertains to the tension between fidelity to this vision of a pluriform community, and the ongoing struggles of the Dalits for identity and justice. Abraham points out the theological implications of this tension:

> Without this common vision our individual identities when affirmed as mutually exclusive will destroy human community. Perhaps this aspect should receive further attention by Dalit theology and by all contextual theologies. While we reject a universalising tendency in sectarian theologies, especially those that come out of dominant groups, we need to keep the dialogue open in such a way that there is scope of learning from others. This is an inescapable demand of being faithful to the one gospel.[130]

Dalit theology hasn't really opened the discursive space to interact with other non-Dalit theologies. Its attitude towards other theologies has been one of broad generalization that such theologies are anti-Dalit. Lott draws attention to how Hindu theologies, in particular the *Vedantic* systems,[131] which have been 'explored earlier by a few Christian theologians (especially Catholics) as possibly providing an appropriate framework for Indian Christian reflection', with the emergence of Dalit consciousness are now seen as forms of dangerous Brahminic hegemony. 'Anything Vedic is now seen as irrevocably linked with Brahminic hierarchical dominance.'[132] In this context of 'the struggle between the indigenity of the 'little tradition' and the powerful hegemonic norms of a dominant culture and its social embodiment', Lott reminds us about the arbitrariness of homogenizing:

> But the homogenizing process is never completely successful. Cultural impact is never merely one-way, and along with the unexpected outposts of resistance and

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[129] According to Abraham: 'The discussion on identity should also take into consideration the solidarity of Christian dalits with dalits in other religions. There are many common concerns and traditions. They are now divided; each group has developed its particular form of sub-culture. But without suppressing such individual Dalit identities, how can we build a common front? Here theology faces a special problem. A dalit theology is based on Christian symbols and language. How do we evolve a common language? Are there insights from other traditions which we must integrate into our theological formulations? Is there a Dalit hermeneutics that can commonly be applied to different dalit traditions?' K.C. Abraham, 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, Vol. XXIX, Nos 1 and 2, March and june 1997 (pp. 36–47), p. 46.

[130] Abraham, 'Dalit Theology: Some Tasks Ahead', p. 46.

[131] The sub-schools of one of the six orthodox Hindu visions or philosophies. Eric j. Lott, 'Hindu Theology's Forgotten Struggles', in Israel Selvanayagam (ed.), *Moving Forms of Theology: Faith Talk's Changing Contexts* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2002) (pp. 76–83), p. 76.

[132] Lott, 'Hindu Theology's Forgotten Struggles', p. 76.

> insurgency that remain, there are also surprising insights to be found within the larger systems. The task remains, therefore, of uncovering these struggles and thereby countering all our cultural assumptions.[133]

One way of dealing with this problem at the theological level would be to focus on contrapuntal hermeneutics. Contrapuntal hermeneutics involves a reading strategy whereby different interpretations undertaken in different backgrounds are read in juxtaposition. The readings complement each other and help us to identify issues with greater depth. There is a need for creative exploration along the lines of contrapuntal hermeneutics between Dalit theological articulations and non-Dalit theological articulations.

Various examples of liberative dimensions which enjoy commonality with Dalit theology can be found within the theologies articulated by non-Dalit theologians. Indian Christian theologian K.P. Aleaz, exhibiting robust theological optimism, has explored the possibility of the convergence of Dalit and Advaitic (philosophy of non-dualism) theologies. Aleaz's attempts are to demonstrate that Advaitic theology is not anti-Dalit theology and that Advaita can provide deeper foundations for Dalit theology.[134] Aleaz concludes that Dalit theology 'need not necessarily represent a discontinuity with Brahminic Indian Christian Theology. There is a Dalit-Advaita Vedantic continuity possible in Indian Christian Theology'.[135] Though I do not fully agree that 'Advaita can provide deeper foundations for Dalit theology', because the foundations of Dalit theology need to be based on the Dalit experience, culture, forms of resistance and protest, I consider that Aleaz's proposition holds valency in the Indian theological context. This is because it opens the possibility of reaching out to other forms of theologizing, free from 'prejudices' and finding points of convergence which can later be validated as starting points of 'mutual-praxis'. For example, Swami Vivekananda's vedantic

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133 Lott, 'Hindu Theology's Forgotten Struggles', p. 83.

134 K.P. Aleaz, 'The Convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies: An Exploration', in *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 361, No. 1 (pp. 97–108), p. 97.

135 Aleaz's findings in his own words are as follows: 'There is a Dalit-Advaita vedantic continuity possible in Indian Christian Theology. Dalit theology can function as a counter theology as other people's theologies are, but it is a converging theology as well due to the Advaita Vedantic-Dalit convergence. Dalit theology can follow a methodological exclusivism where primacy of the term "dalit" is conceded, but this can be done side by side with conceding the primacy of One Brahman-Atman as well. Dalit theology can be a theology from below, a prophetic theology and a political theology as Advaita theology also can be all these. Dalit theology together with Advaitic theology affirm the basic unity between thought and action and consider all knowing as praxiological. The convergence of Dalit-Advaitic theologies affirm the inter-relation between philosophy and sociology; if people's experience is the focus of sociology, human persons are an integral part of the theory of reality (metaphysics) which is a significant aspect of philosophy; it is through social realities philosophical propositions are arrived at'. See Aleaz, 'The Convergence of Dalit-Advaitic Theologies', p. 104.

understanding of jesus as a *Yogi* – one who realized himself as God in his Spirit through renunciation of ego-consciousness[136] – has implications for the Dalit struggle because renunciation of ego-consciousness is vital for transformation of people's attitudes to caste. Brahmabandhab Uphadyaya's interpretation of the fourth gospel on the basis of *advaita* (philosophy of non-dualism) argues that the goal of human life is 'to know God as he is … to be like him and to be united with him'.[137] This enjoys commonality with the ethical imperatives which emerge from Dalit theology, which are: to know God as the suffering Christ, to follow the example of jesus Christ, and be united with jesus Christ by being in solidarity with suffering humanity. The challenge ahead for Dalit theology is to affirm the commonalities as a common starting point for praxis.

One should also seriously reconsider the Dalit understanding of the theology of Appasamy. Appasamy presented Christianity as *Bhakti* religion, which was popular among 'lower-castes'.[138] For Appasamy, selfless love is the nearer equivalent of *Bhakti* than faith and devotion. It is only through a selfless love or *Bhakti* that one can attain *Moksha* or Liberation/Salvation and know Christ.[139] Appasamy used the *visistadvaita* or modified non-dualism, in his exposition of the *Bhakti* tradition to develop his Christology.[140] According to Appasamy the union of Christ with God is moral or ethical and this is the paradigm which should dictate the attitude/relationship of the *Bhakta* (believer) to the Divine. Only through a unity of purpose with God can a believer be in union with God. The ethical imperatives of these dimension of Appasamy's theology have a lot in common with Dalit praxis, which seeks to identify the verity of Christian faith on the basis of its conformity to the paradigm of jesus Christ, whose actions are believed as reflecting the ethics of the reign of God. In what can be directly relevant to Dalit theology, Appasamy affirmed the image of Christ as one who underwent suffering. He rejected the Hindu theistic doctrine of impassibility. Though he adopted the *Bhakti* tradition to articulate his Christology, he recognized that in Hindu *Bhakti* 'the suffering aspect of God is undermined and discounted for the *ananda* (joy) of God'.[141] The unique contribution of Christianity to India according to Appasamy is to reaffirm that jesus' sufferings, though acute, were not the result of sin. This is a subversion of the dominant idea of *Karma* under which an Indian usually connects suffering with sin.[142] Repudiation of the doctrine of *Karma* has profound implications for Dalit theology, because the doctrine of *Karma* has played such an instrumental role in

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[136] Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, p. 56.

[137] Cited in Kaj Baago, *Pioneers of Indigenous Christianity*, pp. 42–3.

[138] A.j. Appasamy, *A Bishop's Story* (Madras: CLS, 1969), p. 12.

[139] See. A.j. Appasamy, *What is Moksha? A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Life* (Madras: CLS, 1931), pp. 1 ff.

[140] Watson, *Towards a Relevant Christology*, pp. 59 ff.

[141] D.W. jesudoss, *What is Man? Theological Attempts and Directions Towards the Formation of an Indian Christian Anthropology for Today* (Madras: GLTCRI, 1986), pp. 3 ff.

[142] jesudoss, *Man*, p. 3.

enslaving the Dalit communities. The suffering aspect of Appasamy's Christology as well as the ethical and moral dimensions of the *Bhakti* and *advaitic* traditions haven't become the focus of Dalit theologians' engagement with Appasamy's theology, rather what has been focused upon is the fact that he uses 'brahmannic philosophical concepts' to articulate his theology. A movement away from such prejudices will pave the way for a mutual-learning process between Dalit theology and non-Dalit theology.

George Matthew Nalunnakkal has also pointed out the need for Dalits to work in solidarity with tribals, especially with regard to their right to land, in the light of their submerged identity as the indigenous or original inhabitants. He points out that land can be 'the most important factor' that can unite Dalits and tribals. Making land a common ideological platform can help tribals and Dalits to counter all developmental projects which destruct the very home of the tribals, as well as challenge the structures which render Dalits as landless labourers. Exploring the question of land and ecology will also go a long way in correcting the existing limitations of Dalit theology, namely its neglect of eco-concerns and its anthropocentricism.[143]

Conclusion

Dalits need to be pro-active in their attempts at transformation. It is imperative for Dalit theology to move away from binary and bipolar models of theologizing and seek models of convergence and interdependence in the articulation of its theology. Dalit theology needs to acknowledge and bear in mind the complexity of Dalit identity and recognize that aspects of fluidity and hybridity constitute Dalit identity, Dalit religion and Dalit existence. This will help in evolving inter-relational modes of praxis which can engage non-Dalits as co-partners in liberation. This will pave the way for a praxis of mutual engagement, where both Dalits and non-Dalits can become partners in the struggle for justice and equality.

[143] George Mathew Nalunnakkal, 'Search for Self-Identity and the Emerging Spirituality: A Dalit Theological Perspective', in *BTF*, Vol. XXX, Nos 1 and 2, March and june 1998 (pp. 25–44).

Conclusion

The point of departure for this book was the recognition that the growing influence of Dalit theology was incompatible with the praxis of the Indian Church, which was passive in its attitude towards the oppression of the Dalits both within and outside the Church. It was recognized that the reasons for this lacuna between Dalit theology and the Church's praxis lay with the content of Dalit theology, which does not offer adequate scope for engagement in praxis. Therefore, the synoptic healing stories were offered and explored as an alternative biblical paradigm, which could enhance the praxis-potential of Dalit theology. In drawing this book to a close this chapter attempts to combine a *summary* and a *synthesis* of the major findings which emerged in the course of this attempt to evaluate the suitability of the synoptic healing stories as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology. The following furnishes the line of thought and argumentation followed in this thesis:

The first chapter of the thesis, *Answering Some Questions – The Why, What and How of Dalit Theology*, interrogated the origins, objectives and approaches of Dalit theology. An important aspect of this chapter was identifying a broad praxiological framework for Dalit theology by weaving together the various theoretical and theological trajectories that have been an integral part of Dalit theological discourses in India. The following were identified as the main features of this praxiological framework:

Dalit liberation, envisaged in terms of a dialectic between identity affirmation and liberative social vision, was recognized as the objective of Dalit theology.

The agency for this liberation lay not only with the Dalits but was also dependent on partnerships with non-Dalits and other like-minded groups. This makes it incumbent for us to understand that the envisaged praxis of Dalit theology is essentially a praxis of partnership.

However, when the theological content of Dalit theology was analysed in relation to this praxiological framework it was found out that there were aspects of Dalit theology which had the potential to curtail the practical efficacy of Dalit theology. Therefore, some questions were posed to the answers which emerged in the first chapter. The second chapter, *Questioning Some Answers*, critically analysed Dalit theology in the light of the problem of practical efficacy and identified several issues which stifled the prospects of liberative engagement. The following issues were identified – lack of an ethical framework to engage with caste-based discrimination, the lack of appropriate space to explore and reflect upon the issue of Dalit agency, the practical inefficaciousness of Dalit theological imaginations of God and Christ because of their inability to resonate with Dalit images of God and further the prospects of liberative engagement, the lack of a 'bipolar ethical imperative which could impinge upon the behaviour of both Dalits

and non-Dalits, freeing them to move beyond their present inhibitions to actively engage in Dalit liberation and the issue of the communicative competence of Dalit theology.

In the light of the findings of the second chapter, the third chapter, *The Way Forward*, explored the synoptic healing stories as an alternative biblical paradigm for Dalit Theology. It argued for the validity of the proposal on the basis of the scope which the stories allowed for hermeneutical appropriation in the Indian caste context as well as their potential in offering a corrective praxiological thrust to Dalit Theology. The fourth chapter, *A Christian Ethical Framework of Action*, identified four ethical principles from the synoptic healing stories to guide Christian responses to caste-based discrimination, namely, touch (understood as defiance), faith, compassion and conflict/confrontation. While the feature 'faith' could be identified as the actions of the oppressed in the form of initiative and persistence, the other features – touch, compassion, conflict and confrontation – were identifiable with j esus' actions. Effort was made to identify the interplay of these four features within the context of select healing stories vis-à-vis the motif of boundary-transcendence.

Chapters five to seven undertook the task of '*Reading for Liberation'*, recognizing that the ultimate aim of people's readings of the Bible is more to interpret their lives and context in the light of biblical texts, than to interpret the Bible. Therefore, chapters five to seven interpreted three healing stories in the light of three issues which emerged in the critical analysis of Dalit theology, namely the practical efficaciousness of Dalit imaginations of God and Christ, the question of Dalit agency and resistance, and the issue of praxiological partnerships. The fifth chapter, *Revisiting Christology*, analysed the story of the healing of the leper found in Mark 1:40–45 in relation to the motif of boundary transcendence. Specific attention was paid to the need for a transition in Dalit Christology from a suffering Christ to a liberating Christ. The identity of both j esus and the leper as boundary-breakers in the story was recognized while drawing out praxiological principles for action. Implications for a liberative Dalit Christology were drawn in interaction with the various liberative trajectories of the image of j esus which appear in this story.

The sixth chapter, *Rethinking Agency, Re-signifying Resistance*, explored an exorcism focusing on the issue of the Dalit agency and deployment of resistance in self-liberation. Recognizing the resistive element in possession in contexts of oppression enabled an analogical hermeneutical engagement with Dalit forms of resistance. Insights for a praxis of resistance were drawn on the basis of an allegorical interpretation of j esus' exorcizing actions. In the light of the Dalit experiences, where symbolic resistance by itself was not effective for transformation, the need for a dialectic balance between symbolic and real resistance was brought out and it was argued that symbolic resistance functioning as a proleptic to pragmatic and concrete liberation was important for the Dalits. The primacy of solidarity and community for Dalit resistance to gather momentum, and the need to radically deconstruct the images of the oppressors which perpetuate inferiority, were also identified as the

praxiological principles which emerge from the story. The story also offered scope for a discussion on the issue of collaboration and collusion with the caste-structures, which is another pertinent issue in the Dalit struggles for liberation.

The seventh chapter, *Re-configuring Dalit Praxis – Re-imagining the Other*, discusses in detail the story of the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman found in both Matthew and Mark in relation to the praxis of partnership envisaged by Dalit theology. This chapter focused on evolving integrationist and inclusive models of praxis for Dalit theology in order to enhance the praxis potential of Dalit theology. Focus was placed on the politics of 'othering' both within and outside Dalit theology. The chapter worked out a rationale for moving beyond 'othering' towards an 'other-centred praxis' which can help in evolving pragmatic and holistic partnerships that can lead to concrete and corporate engagement in the task of Dalit liberation. The image of j esus as a teachable man, the convention-subverting initiative and persistence of the woman, and the consensual mode of negotiations between the woman and j esus were identified as having paradigmatic force to forge a praxis of partnership in the Dalit context. Critical attention was drawn to the manner in which the politics of 'othering' is acted out in the Indian context and even in the context of Dalit theology. Drawing attention to the hybrid identities of the woman and j esus which emerge in the story, the potential of the story to offer space for analysing the complexity of Dalit identity was discussed. Some praxiological possibilities for a creative and constructive deployment of the hybridity of Dalit identity were pointed out. A praxiological principle of mutual engagement and openness to the 'Other' was identified from the interaction between the woman and j esus. When this principle was applied to the Dalit context, the problems involved in the relationship between Dalit theology and other non-Dalit contextual theologies were highlighted. The need for Dalit theology to transcend 'theological ghettoization' was also pointed out.

From the findings of the seven chapters it can be concluded that the proposal for appropriating the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm for Dalit theology makes the original obstacles that seemed to inhibit the praxis potential of Dalit theology seem much less formidable. On the basis of our interplay between the Dalit context and the synoptic healing stories, it has become obvious that the four constituent features of the ethical framework identified for Christian praxis in this thesis – touch (understood as defiance of the rules of social semiotics), faith (understood as initiative and persistence), compassion (understood in cognitive, affective and volitional terms) and conflict/confrontation – are present and operant, either implicitly or explicitly, in various contextually-concrete and specific forms, in secular Dalit praxis where significant transformation has been made possible. Thus, there is evidence for the practicability of the ethical framework delineated in this thesis in terms of the possibilities it posits for Christian praxis. This further strengthens the argument that the synoptic healing stories can enhance the praxiological potential of Dalit theology. Moreover, as the synoptic healing stories have the ability both to espouse issues which are integral to the question of praxis and to articulate paradigms which make the Indian Christian involvement

in practical action possible, we can conclude that the synoptic healing stories can function as a relevant biblical paradigm for Dalit theology and can enhance its praxis-potential significantly.

Making Synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology also helps us to engage constructively with the problem of essentialism. When appropriating the synoptic healing narratives as its biblical paradigm, Dalit theology resorts to a 'pre-figuration' of its 'subject position' (i.e. Dalits) as the sick and the polluted. Essentialism, which refers to 'a belief in true essences ... that which is irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing',[1] becomes inevitable in such pre-figuration of identity. However, postmodernism and poststructuralism have brought out the problems associated with essentialism. Apart from exposing essentialism as a strategy of power, these discourses have pointed out how attributing to subjects a set of essential characteristics can actually contribute to the regulation and reification of identities along traditionally recognized lines, something which is surely the aim of these discourses to disrupt.[2] Therefore, one pertinent question which emerges in relation to the proposal to appropriate the synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology is whether they reinforce subjectivities which are counterproductive to Dalit liberation?

However, it has to be noted that essentialism has an enabling effect for an identity-specific discourse like Dalit theology because without essentialism the whole notion of a Dalit identity is questionable. A certain component of essentialism in Dalit theological discourse, along the lines of Gayathri Chakraborthy Spivak's often misunderstood phrase 'strategic essentialism' is indispensable for Dalit theology. Laura Arnold helps us understand the concept of 'strategic essentialism' further:

> The best way to understand strategic essentialism is to see it as an appropriation of the notion of essentialism by oppressed groups .... Although strategic essentialism also argues that groups have 'essential attributes,' it differs from regular essentialism in two key ways: first, the 'essential attributes' are defined by the group itself, not by outsiders trying to oppress the group. Second, in strategic essentialism, the 'essential attributes' are acknowledged to be a construct. That is, the group rather paradoxically acknowledges that such attributes are not natural (or intrinsically essential), but are merely invoked when it is politically useful to do so. Moreover, members of the group maintain the power to decide when the attributes are 'essential' and when they are not. In this way, strategic essentialism can be a powerful political tool.[3]

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1 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 2.

2 Natalie Fenton 'The Problematics of Postmodernism for Feminist Media Studies', in *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 22: 6 (pp. 723–41), p. 725.

3 Laura Arnold, http://academic.reed.edu/english/courses/English558/Week2.html.

Making the synoptic healing narratives the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology makes a 'strategic essentialism' possible through which one can critically highlight the effects of notions of purity and pollution in the oppression of both the sick in the biblical world as well as the Dalits in the Indian context. By appropriating these narratives as its biblical paradigm Dalit theology becomes 'truth-telling'. These narratives also make strategical essentialism possible because of two other important reasons.

Firstly, the synoptic healing stories have the potential to 'essentialize' Dalit identity in a manner which conforms to the way in which Dalits themselves imaginatively configure their own subjectivity in their myths of origin. It is, so to speak, 'an essentialism emerging from within' rather than an eternally defined essentialism. Secondly, and intrinsically inter-related with the first, the synoptic healing stories also provide space for reflection upon the heterogeneous nature of Dalit agency. There is an active 'agential-presence' both for those who are healed as well as those who approach j esus for the healing of others. These narratives do not portray those who approach j esus for healing as monolithic, placid, passive and inert objects of charity. Hence, these narratives can function as an immense 'laboratory for thought experiments',[4] which in interaction with Dalit experiences and the Dalit ethos can undergo further refiguration leading to the formation of new 'technologies of the self',[5] to use Foucault's phrase, which will enable the Dalits to attain their goal of liberation. One can recover a dynamism which is invested in these characters, which when reconfigured as Dalit agency helps us to transcend any monolithic conceptualization of the Dalits. Thus, the synoptic healing stories have the potential to accentuate and pay attention to the polyvocality of Dalit agency in their struggles for liberation. The synoptic healing stories have the capacity to foster what Maria Arul Raja calls the spirit of 're-creation', the matrix of Dalit hermeneutics, which can be 'understood as both the "re-creation" of the Dalit identity from the debris of the battered self and the recreation of any reality into a new reality by Dalit intervention'.[6] Making the synoptic healing stories the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology opens up the space not only for imagining

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[4] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 159.

[5] Techonologies of the self are one of the four technologies of power (along with technologies of production, technologies of sign systems and technologies of power) which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination. These technologies of the self, 'permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. Michel Foucault, 'Technologies of the Self,' in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), p. 18.

[6] A. Maria Arul Raja, 'Harmony in the Midst of Anarchy: The Anatomy of the Spirit of Dalit Liberation', in *VJTR*, Vol. 63, 1999, pp. 416–28.

such agency but also for recognizing the resonances between the agency invested in the 'marginal characters' of the healing narratives and Dalit agency in the secular realm. Thus, they offer space for a recovery of the plurality of Dalit agency which can animate the Dalit struggle for liberation.

Further, this paradigm also offers scope to rethink the notion of Dalit identity. The opportunity that the current biblical paradigms in Dalit theology have allowed Dalit theologians to methodologically forego notions of fixed identities and explore the multiplicity and the fluidity of Dalit agency has been limited and consequently limiting. Synoptic healing stories contain in them the spores to reverse this phenomenon by enabling us to take into account the variations of Dalit agency. This by itself implies resistance to the reification of the category Dalit into something incontrovertible, instead expanding the horizons and the possibilities of re-covering the category Dalit through a deconstruction of monolithic category and reconstitution of a new category of agency. Thus, the relevance of the synoptic healing stories in enhancing the practical efficacy of Dalit theology should not be neglected.

Making the synoptic healing stories the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology and focusing on the notions of purity and pollution also offer other interesting future possibilities for the praxis of Dalit theology. Though Dalit theology is ideologically pro-women and Dalit religiosity consists of matriarchal deities, Dalit theology does not pay adequate attention to the issue of Dalit women, who are often referred to as the thrice-alienated ones – being alienated on the basis of their caste, class, and gender.[7] There is a sense of hegemony in Dalit theology when it obfuscates the uniqueness of women's experience in its theological articulation by homogenizing Dalit experiences to imply Dalit male experiences alone. Dalit Christian women occupy a marginalized status within the Church,[8] and suffer from discrimination, lack of adequate representation, and denial of full participation in the Church.[9] However, no attention is paid to this discrimination. Making synoptic healing stories as the biblical paradigm for Dalit theology can not only offer scope to address notions of purity and pollution which are foundational for the discrimination against women on issues like women's ordination,[10] sexual freedom,[11] and women's general social status, but they can also help foster greater

[7] See Aruna Gnanadason, 'Dalit Women: The Dalit of the Dalit', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader* (pp. 129–38), and Ruth Manorama, 'Dalit Women: Downtrodden among the Downtrodden', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 159–67).

[8] Melanchton, 'Dalit Readers of the Word', p. 48.

[9] Monica Melanchton, 'Indian Dalit Women and the Bible', in Ursula King and Tina Beattie (eds), *Gender, Religion & Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (London: Continuum, 2004) (pp. 212–24).

[10] D. Rebecca Sangeetha, 'Women's Ordination and Biblical Hermeneutics', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2004 (pp. 29–32), p. 29.

[11] Kumud Pawde, 'The Position of Dalit women in Indian Society', in Massey (ed.), *Indigenous People* (pp. 143–58), p. 154, Also see L. jayachitra, 'Is Virginity an Issue only for Women', in *In God's Image*, Vol. 23, No. 3, September 2004. (pp. 35–9), p. 36.

sensitivity to the specificity of women's experiences (the haemorrhaging woman) and can open space for an affirmation of Dalit women as agents of liberative praxis (the Syrophoenician woman). This is pertinent in the Indian Church context, where the role and contribution of Dalit women in their family, Church and society are often unacknowledged.[12] One more issue which has come under critical scrutiny but has never been dealt with theologically is the issue of internal-Dalit hierarchy. Dalit Christians would be self-deceptive and hypocritical in declaring that they do not discriminate against other Dalit sub-castes as Christian Dalits. Wilson points out that Christian Dalits not only scrupulously practise sub-casteism but also 'entertain a false superior attitude in relation to the non-Christian Dalit sections'.[13] Synoptic healing stories, because of their potential to address any kind of discrimination, offer the possibility for Dalit theology to address the issue of intra-Dalit hierarchy critically.

Before I conclude it would be worth acknowledging that the origins of this work lie in my own personal discontentment at Dalit theology's failure to be effective in a practical manner. In a context where a conspiracy of silence continues, the attempts towards Dalit liberation, justice and equality demand sacrifice. Thus, the role of the Indian Church to make the cause of Dalit liberation a sincere priority is a necessary complement to the revision of Dalit theology. It is only through this partnership that transformation is possible.

In conclusion, it can be said that this book has been an exercise in critical self-reflectivity for Dalit theology. In the light of the widening gap between Dalit theology and praxis I attempted a reconfiguration of certain areas of Dalit theology using the synoptic healing stories as a biblical paradigm. My hope is that with the synoptic healing stories as its biblical paradigm Dalit theology can be re-perceived as a concrete and context-specific expression of the Christian faith, which can stand, in the words of Forrester, 'as more than an empty husk of unfulfilled expectations and a bastion of group interests'.[14] Through this revised Dalit theology, Indian Christianity can give shape to and sustain hope – 'the kind of hope that strengthens and comforts the weak and vulnerable, that disturbs the comfortable, and rouses the complacent … the kind of hope which makes reconciliation and community possible' and without which Dalits and non-Dalits are 'doomed to internecine strife and suspicion'.[15]

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[12] See also Mary Schaller Blaufuss, 'Unexpected Agents of God's Grace-ful Mission: Women's Participation in Christian Mass Movements in India', in George (ed.), *The God of all Grace* (pp. 441–51).

[13] Wilson, 'Towards a Humane Culture', in Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader*, p. 163.

[14] Duncan B. Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Explorations in Unsystematic Theology* (London/New York: T & T Clark International, 2005), p. 146.

[15] Forrester, *Theological Fragments*, p. 146.

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