

Political Charity in the Context of Inter-Religious Dialogue

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Introduction

From time immemorial, India has been a land of religious tolerance and it has been rich in culture, language, tradition and wisdom. It is also known for its Philosophy. It had been receptive to various religions, such as, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Sikhism, Parsism and Jainism. For centuries, religious co-existence had been a hallmark of Indian tradition. All these religions co-existed in a perfect manner and the people of India grew as one nation and as one people in spite of their differences in religion. Hinduism which is an ancient religion, by its very nature is a religion of tolerance and the people also had the same nature. But over the years, the situation has changed. Hinduism has been redefined by a group of people and fundamentalism has crept into the minds of some people. The seed of fundamentalism has been sown in the soil of India and in some places it has already taken root and it is trying to take roots in some other places. As a whole the Hindu fundamentalism is very much alive and no doubt it is catching like a wild fire.

The rise of Hindu fundamentalism is the situation in which we live. Our formation should be context-based and the students should be formed based on the political, social and economical situation of today. In other words, our Vincentian formation should be based on political charity. Political charity implies three things; (1) to be aware of the political situation in which we live (2) to analyze it critically (3) to respond to that situation. Political charity demands that our formation should be well inserted into the socio-political situation of today. Hence, this paper makes an attempt to highlight the political situation of India, how we can respond to it theologically and finally how our Vincentian formation could be made effective in the light of the political situation of today.

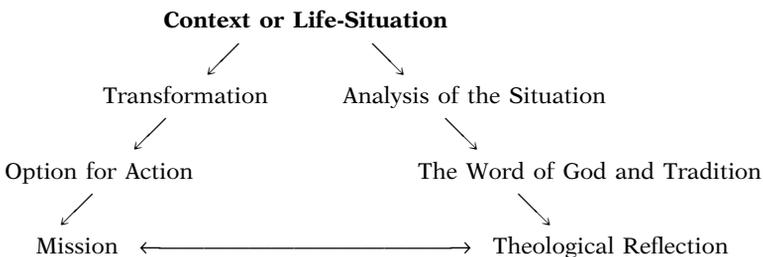
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Methodology

For our methodology, first and foremost the situation is the basis and foundation. Our theologizing, like the theologizing of the prophets, must be rooted in the concrete historical situation. This historical situation includes the political, social and religious situation. All theology of course implies an on-going dialogue between the theologian's situation and his text. But the starting point of this dialogue, if it to be fruitful, must be the situation not the text. In other words, it is a contextualization of theology. Contextualization is a response to a particular socio-political, religious and economic situation. It must be recognized that "Contextualization" is not simply a fad or a catchword but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the word. "The word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14) is the basis for our contextual theology. After taking into consideration the context, which is the base for our theological reflection, we study it in an analytical way. In other words, we analyze the situation in a critical and objective way without any prejudice and bias.

After analyzing the context, we have to take recourse to the word of God and tradition. In this process, we reflect over the context and situation in the light of the word of God and tradition. After careful reflection, certainly a new theology arises out of a particular context and situation. In this theological process, there is also an internal process that takes place. While reflecting over the situation in the light of the word of God and tradition, there is transformation of understanding. Transformation is from pre-understanding to understanding. A transformation is needed in our way of thinking and our attitude. We have the right thinking and attitude towards others, while getting rid of our biases and prejudices. It is not only that we remain at the thinking level, but also we involve ourselves in an action. Action is nothing but mission.

The following diagram will explain well our methodology.



Context: The emergence of Hindutva force in India

In simple terms Hindutva means Hinduism that is the total aspect of “Hinduness.” It is to revive the Hindu culture, tradition and religious practices of Hindu and to imbibe a spirit of Hinduism in the people of Hindu religion. Hindutva is commonly identified with the guiding ideology of the *Sangh Parivar* (Family of associations), a family of Hindu nationalist organizations. The first Hindutva organization formed was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), founded in 1925. A prominent Indian political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is closely associated with a group of organizations that advocate Hindutva. They collectively refer to themselves as the “Sangh Parivar” or family of associations, which include the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Bajarang Dal and the Vishva Hindu Parishad. The major political wing is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) which was in power in India’s central Government for six years from 1998 to 2004 and at present it is the main opposition party.

“One nation, one culture, one people and one leader” has become the dominant and fundamental slogan of the Sangh Parivar.¹ Their fundamental argument is that the Hindus are a majority and hence they should exercise authority, precedence and domination over others. The Sangh Parivar’s slogan is aiming at bringing Christians and Muslims under the domination of Hindus. Their one nation theory always takes recourse to history and warns the citizens that there are “hostile forces” or to state it in their own words “foreign hands” within and outside the country who are all out to destroy the national unity and pride. Hence, all should be united to face this threat. In this thought pattern the “other” the “enemy” is projected as ready to devour the entire nation, culture, economy and society and thus various segments are mobilized to face this ‘threat.’

Gleaning through historical records, one becomes aware of the fact that from 1980 onward the Sangh Parivar has come to occupy a specific space in the society and polity of India. Till 1980 the Sangh Parivar remained as an insignificant organization, being strong only in certain pockets of India, taking up some issues pertaining to Hindu culture and religion but without having a strong voice at a political level. From 1980 onwards, it started growing steadily. The peak moment of the Sangh Parivar was the demolition of the Mosque at Ayodhya in 1992. It took up the temple issue at Ayodhya and stirred up the religious sentiment of the Hindu People. The Ayodhya issue

¹ Family of associations.

was close to the heart of the Sangh Parivar. It took Ram to the people through symbols to which they could easily relate. Ram, Ayodya and the temple were thus brought close to the social and cultural life of the people. In doing so, what the fundamentalist group has achieved is to identify itself with the cultural life of the Hindus and to project itself as the champion of their religion. After the demolition of the Mosque at Ayodya, it won the hearts of Hindus in some parts of India and as a result the Sangh Parivar's political wing, namely the Bharatiya Janata Bharty (BJP) captured power in some states of India and eventually it captured power at the center in 1998. During their rule, they were executing their hidden agenda of promoting a Hindu nation by targeting the minorities, both Christians and Muslims.

Central Concepts of the Sangh Parivar

- The Indian Subcontinent is the homeland of the Hindus.
- "Hindus" are those who consider India to be their fatherland as well as their holy land.
- Emphasizing historical oppression of Hindus by invading forces like the Muslims and Christians and the call to "reverse" the influence resulting from these intrusions.
- Denunciation of British colonialism and communism alike for a perceived weakening of Hindus.
- The irredentist call for the establishment of a "Hindu nation" to protect Hindus and to revive Hindu culture.

Views on other Faiths

The advocates of Hindutva often use the term Pseudo-Secularism to refer to laws which they believe are very favorable toward minorities. They point to the different standards for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. Hence they want a uniform civil code. The subject of a uniform civil code, which would remove special religion-based provisions for different religions (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, etc.) from the Indian constitution, is thus one of the main political planks of Hindutva. Hindutva followers question differential laws in terms of marriage and divorce and ask why in a secular democracy Muslims are allowed polygamy, but Hindus or Christians are prosecuted for doing the same. Christians are also given separate laws for divorce, which are more difficult for them than for Hindus. The followers of the Hindutva speak for the Hindu majority in India. They also often feel that secular democracy implies equal laws for all

religions, and want a uniform civil code passed for the same reason. One must also differentiate between the word “secularism” as used in the Western and Indian contexts. Secularism in the West implies “separation of church and state” whereas secularism in India means “equal respect for all religions.” Among the goals of the Hindutva organizations in modern India is a reversing of the invasions by conquerors. They include demands to convert disputed historical monuments into temples.

Implementation of Hindutva Policies

The Hindutva force started implementing their Hindutva policies in some states where they rule:

1. Introducing the “anti-conversion bill” which makes it difficult for both missionaries and for individuals to convert to Christianity from Hinduism. It is introduced to counter the menace of the proselytizing religions of Christianity and Islam. Since the Hindutva force believes in a religiously defined nationhood, the conversion of Hindus to foreign faiths is seen as a grave threat to Hindu nationhood.
2. Introducing the “anti-cow slaughter bill.” It is basically aiming at the formation of a Hindu nation. The Cow is a sacred animal for Hindus. By banning the slaughtering of cows, they have double motives. One is to make India as a Hindu nation and another motive is to target the Muslims and Christians who eat the cow meat.
3. Using education to spread the Hindutva ideology. Under this agenda, the content of education from the primary level to the higher education stage should be “Indianized,” nationalized and spiritualized. In some of their ruled states, they changed the syllabus and content of the subject in order to propagate the Hindutva ideology.
4. Appointing persons as government officials who are supporters of Hindutva ideology. In the BJP-ruled states, high ranking officials are the hand-pick of the Hindutva force who have an inclination towards their policies. Hence they could manipulate the government machineries for their end.
5. Intimidation of both Christians and Muslims in the states where the Hindutva force is ruling. Sustained attacks on Churches and Christian schools across the country. Physical attack on Christian missionaries and nuns are very common in the Hindutva ruled states. The intimidation aims at the curbing of activities of our missionaries.

Critical Analysis of the situation

When we look at the situation where the Hindutva force is becoming stronger, the present situation shows that for Christians, a great challenge is ahead of them. When we study it from a historical point of view, we, the Christian missionaries directly or indirectly contributed to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism. Of course, Muslims too played a role in that. First of all, the invaders both British and Muslim are to take a lion's share for being causes for the rise of Hindutva forces. The British and Muslim emperors had scant respect for Hinduism. They ridiculed the Hindu religion, saying that they are pagan gods and they also did not respect the holy places. The Muslim emperors converted a few temples into Mosques. Hence the negative attitude of the British and Muslims forced some Hindus to unite themselves under the banner of Rashtray Swayam Sevek (RSS) and ultimately it gave birth to different fundamental groups, including the political wing BJP.

Another factor which contributed to the rise of Hindutva force is our own theology and the activities of missionaries. Way back, India was filled with foreign missionaries who were very zealous in mass conversion. They were converting a lot of Dalits and Tribals to Christianity which the Hindutva force perceived as a threat to the Hindu religion. They thought that if they allowed the Christian missionaries to convert the Dalits² and Tribals, the Hindu religion would finally become extinct. Hence, they were up in arms against the Christian missionaries for their interest in conversion. The Hindutva force is against any conversion from Hinduism to Christianity. One of the main agenda items of the Hindutva force is to stop conversion.

Transformation: A change of attitude

The above-mentioned factors which directly or indirectly contributed to the rise of Hindutva force, now call for a change. A change is needed in our attitude, in our thinking and in our theology too. It is true that over the years the Church in India has been thinking seriously on the relationship with other religions, especially with Hinduism. We do have a positive attitude towards Hinduism; however, against the background of the past experience, the Hindutva forces are suspicious about us. They are suspicious about our educational institutions which they think are for

² A group of people belong to low caste in India.

converting people. They are suspicious about our social services which they think are aimed at converting people. Here, we need to have a change in our mission. We have to move from converting souls to converting persons. In other words, instead of increasing the number of Baptisms, we need to work for the welfare of humanity, society and the nation at large and through which we can certainly bear witness to Christ. Jesus, while he was on earth, had only twelve disciples and he was not obsessed with the increase of disciples. But he was more focused on his ministry rather than increasing his followers. Similarly our main focus should be ministry, i.e. doing good to humanity not the increase of the number of baptisms.

The Church teaching on other religions

In India in the context of different religions, particularly in the context of Hinduism, a lot of theological activities have been going on. Indeed the Second Vatican Council gave a boost to the theological movement in India. Almost all theological reflections in India began to situate themselves in the context of non-Christian religions, especially Hinduism. Since then, the church in India has been striving hard to better its relationship with the other religions.

One of the stumbling blocks for a relationship with Hinduism was the understanding of Salvation. Earlier missionaries were convinced that there was no salvation outside the church which was indeed a cause for animosity between Hinduism and Christianity. Now, the Vatican II recognizes the universal saving will of God (II Vatican, *Lumen Gentium*, 16). It is because of this universal saving will that there are workings of God in other religions. Although the workings of God in other religions are hidden, they are not totally unknown to the Church. In the ways of conduct and of the life of the people, and in the precepts and teachings of the religions, *Nostra Aetate* perceives the reflection of a ray of the truth, the Christ who enlightens all. John Paul II when he came to India and spoke on other religions, he said that in Christ God is working out the salvation in a way also through the different religions of the people. God makes himself “present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain ‘gaps,’ insufficiencies and errors” (taken from speeches of John Paul II, when he visited India). The document stated that it may be the providence of God that the people belonging to the different religions, through the different very true religious efforts, may achieve salvation (II Vatican, *Ad Gentes*, 3, cf. also *Lumen Gentium*, 16).

As I mentioned earlier, one of the reasons for the rise of Hindu fundamentalism is our own attitude, a negative attitude of condemning other religions, saying that there is no salvation outside the church. This attitude did infuriate the Hindu fundamentalist and as a result they are against conversions in India. Now, our attitude has been changed and Vatican II clearly highlights the point that there is salvation outside the church. Hence, we need to acknowledge other religions and their way to attain salvation which may not be as fully revealed religion as our Christian religion. This thinking indeed helps the Hindutva force to get rid of their biases against Christianity especially with regard to our motivation of conversion.

Theological Reflection: Dialogue as Mission

Taking into consideration the pluralistic context of India and in the light of Vatican II, we need to rethink our mission. In a pluralistic context, inter-religious dialogue is part of the Church's evangelizing mission. The council calls for dialogue with the non-Christian religions. This dialogue has its roots in the very concept of Religion, which is a dialogue between Man and God (cf. Paul VI, ES 70). Hence dialogue should be a mission of every religion, especially for the catholic religion. Dialogue with other religions always aims at mutual respect and mutual understanding. To achieve this objective, first and foremost, the religions at dialogue should share their theological views and ideas. It is not to find fault or errors in theological understanding. Rather it is to understand each one's stand on theological issues and to respect each one's view point. It is not for an argumentation that we enter into theological discussion, but it is for enriching one another with rich theological thoughts. Earlier, Christian theologians were critical about the theology of the Hindu religion and its tradition. But now, dialogue helps us to accept their viewpoint and to appreciate it. The appreciation and acceptance of other's views, especially on the Hindu religion, will help the fundamentalist group to change their attitude. In fact, fundamentalism is a reaction to the negative attitude of Christians towards the Hindu. Our misconception and misunderstanding of the Hindu religion invited the wrath of the fundamentalist. Dialogue indeed helps us to have a better understanding with the fundamentalist group. Hence, dialogue is one of the means through which we can reach out to our Hindu brethren. In this process, each religion stands in its position and expresses its view without criticizing the other. We engage in dialogue to clarify and to remove misunderstandings between two religions. This will help us to have a better relationship with the other religions in a pluralistic context.

By sharing our theological views and ideas through dialogue, we also seek the truth. Pope John Paul II said in Madras, India, that “dialogue is a means of seeking after truth and sharing it with others” (taken from speeches of John Paul II, when he visited India). It is this truth that has come to unite all the people as one humankind in love. Every religion seeks after truth. If we accept this basic principle, we can somewhat mellow down the fundamentalism. Absolutism also leads religion to fundamentalism. Hindu fundamentalism is a reaction to our absolutism. But now, we accept that other religions also contain truth. “The Catholic church recognizes the truths that are contained in the religious traditions of India” (II Vatican, *Nostra Aetate*, 3-4). Religions in India, especially Hinduism, are ardent seekers of truth. In this context “dialogue is a means of seeking after truth and sharing it with others.” *Dignitatis Humane* of Vatican II states that by dialogue people will be sharing “with each other the truth they have discovered, or are convinced they have discovered, in such a way that they help one another in the search for truth.” Today’s India has been experiencing division, hatred and disunity because of fundamentalism. By seeking truth in other religions, especially in Hinduism, the Catholic Church can bring unity and fellowship in the society. As Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 1, says, “it is the truth that human beings have in common and on what promotes fellowship among them.”

Kingdom of God as mission

First of all, the Kingdom of God should not be identified with the Church. The Kingdom of God is a wider concept than the Church. The Church is a sign of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God can be understood in three ways. One way, we can understand the kingdom as the future of the Church. This interpretation leads us to rigidity and exclusiveness. The church is seen as the beginnings of the kingdom. Another way of understanding the kingdom is to insist that it is not merely a future, heavenly reality, but has to be realized here and now in history as a human community of freedom, fellowship and love. People would however agree that the kingdom is not merely an earthly reality and that while we must keep on striving for the realization of the kingdom in this sense in human society, its actual advent may be eschatological in or beyond history. In this interpretation, the kingdom is understood as both present and future reality. The problem with this interpretation is that it is very much limited to the church. It sees the church as kingdom which is both a present and future reality. This interpretation will not be applicable to a pluralistic society. A third way of understanding the kingdom

refers to its presence also in other religions and cultures as God's continuing activity. The kingdom in this sense transcends the Church. The concept of kingdom goes beyond religion and culture. The church is only a historically and culturally conditioned realization of it. In promoting and serving it the church is called to realize its limitations and open out to other cultures and religions in dialogue. Through dialogue we acknowledge the presence of the kingdom in other religions. This acknowledgment and acceptance of God's presence in the other religions will really open the doors for the Hindu religion. Our closed-door attitude is one of the reasons for the Hindu fundamentalist to nurture hatred and animosity towards us.

Our narrow way of interpreting the "Church" and the "Kingdom of God" leads one to the mission of "saving of souls." In the past there was an anxiety to baptize and save as many as possible from hell fire. Now that we believe that God is reaching out to every human person in ways unknown to us, we can afford to be less anxious and ask ourselves whether the meaning of mission is not so much the saving of souls, but of being a force for the transformation of societies in view of their final fulfillment. The reinterpretation of the "Kingdom of God," invites us to work for the transformation of the society, not for increasing the quantity of the Church members but for a qualitative change in the society. The Kingdom of God is to build a society based on the values of justice, love and truth. The Kingdom of God means to establish a community of fellowship, brotherhood and sisterhood. The mission of the church is to work towards establishing the kingdom here on earth. In order to spread the kingdom, we need to work with the other religions. God's Kingdom is a common platform where all the religions meet to bring about transformation in the society. The dialogue with the other religions will help us to come together to fight against all inhuman structures, and will enable us to bring a just society which the Kingdom of God envisages. In order to bring the Kingdom of God here on earth, we need to join hands with the other religions and fight against the anti-kingdom forces. According to John Paul II, in a multi-religious society like India, the inter-religious dialogue will help the people to work together for the defense of shared human and spiritual values, and for the promotion of integral development. The dialogue will be a catalytic agent for giving a sense of solidarity among all religions in their effort to fight against the militant religious fundamentalism which threatens the unity of the people of India. Finally, we could conclude saying that dialogue helps us to work with the other religions in bringing about transformation in the society and thus we can establish the Kingdom of God which is a community of fellowship, brotherhood and sisterhood which Jesus envisaged.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I would like to give some concrete suggestions for our formation:

- Formation is to be rooted in the historical-social situation of people; in this sense, Formation is not to be away or secluded from the life-situation of people; rather it is to be with people and a student has to immerse himself in the situation of people.
- Students should be well exposed to fundamentalism.
- Students should be well informed about the faith of other religions and should have first-hand experience of other religions.
- Our formation should enable students to face the challenges of fundamentalism.