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Globalization: In Asia the Church is Part of the Problem

The fish must get out of the ocean for it to have a clear idea of the ocean. We who are born and brought up as Christians do not realize how the others perceive us unless we get into their shoes and look at ourselves from the outside. This will answer the question why, while in Europe the anti-globalization pickets and protests are held in front of United Nations or World Bank offices or when the G-7 summit is held, in Asia the same protests are directed against (often violently) Christian churches, Christian Institutions or Christians themselves. We must also take into account that nationalist movements like Hindutva, Bhumi Putra, Islamic Fundamentalism et. al. do not emerge in a vacuum, but in context. And the context is globalization.

The Christian Church comes across to the non-Christians in Asia as an organization more political than religious. When the Pope arrives in any country he is accorded a reception as for a head of State with top protocol which no other religious leader gets. Is he a political figure or a religious figure? Asia is baffled. For in Asia a religious leader is a man of God who is unobtrusive and humble, who shuns all glitter and lime-light. He speaks softly with great compassion and never will he denigrate another's belief or religion. But the Pope is quite abrasive and aggressive when he speaks of other religions. In response to "The Threshold of Hope," Hevanpola Rathnasara, said at Gethsemane, Kentucky: "When non-Buddhists express opinions of Buddhism, they should take care to do their home-work. Ill-informed comments not only engender ill feelings but an attitude of condescension on the other side". (1) And another Buddhist monk commented in the local Sinhala Newspaper on the Statement the Pope made at the beginning of the new millennium, thus: "The respected Pope says that in the first millennium

Europe was Christianized, in the second millennium America and Africa were Christianized, and in the third millennium Asia will be Christianized. The seriousness of this statement consists in denying the very existence of the Great Religions of the East. Indirectly, it says that they should not exist” (translation mine). Then the monk continues to contrast the Pope and his statement with Thive Gnathan Thero, a gentle and humble Vietnamese teacher-monk who has a much sought after Meditation Retreat in France. (2)

What confirms that the Church is a political apparatus is the worldwide network of Vatican diplomats or apostolic Nunciatures. The Vatican does not have activities like bilateral trade, cultural exchanges, defense/military pacts, financial agreements, or immigration/emigration formalities to be attended to by the missions. Then what business takes place in them is a mystery. The maintenance of all these missions is an immense expense. Could it be only for the appointment of a bishop now and then? Or could there be other hidden reasons that make it worthwhile maintaining so many diplomatic missions at such expense? The Vatican Embassies have a great advantage over the other diplomatic missions, as far as gathering sensitive and politically vital information about a country. It has a faithful Catholic community right across the social strata, from Government Ministers to the humble workers, peasants and fishermen, from whence even the slightest shift of public opinion can be monitored from the top.

It is revealing to peruse the history of the Church in Asia to understand its political stand. Christianity arrived in Asia hand in hand with political conquest of lands by the Portuguese. The early missionaries considered the spreading of the Faith and political conquests as one enterprise. (3) And the secular powers made use of the religion to accomplish their plans of conquest. (4) Often missionaries were spies for the political/military arm of the colonial establishment. (5). The exceptions to this rule were very few like Matteo Ricci and Robert de Nobili. Their attempts

at inculturation without political conquest were squashed by the Vatican. If today China rejects diplomatic relations with the Vatican, it is not because of Mao's Communist ideology, but because of Vatican refusal to accept Chinese Rite as orthodox and its suspicious behavior towards Jesuit envoys of Emperor Xianxi, sent to the Vatican to plead the case in favor of Chinese Rites. None of the six envoys the Emperor sent returned to Peking. Two were murdered, two died under suspicious circumstances, two were not allowed to return to China. (6) Peking never trusted the Vatican after that. The Vatican is swayed by the global powers that be, even going to the length of betraying its own people. When the conflict between the Archbishop Oscar Romero and the government establishment was coming to a head; and Romero accused the establishment of the killings and the disappearances, it was the Vatican diplomat Msgr. Girardo who made a statement defending the establishment and finding fault with Romero. Soon after that Oscar Romero was gunned down. Was the statement of the Vatican diplomat a sort of green light for somebody to go ahead and get rid of the 'problem-Romero'? Maybe not but the statement of the Nuncio certainly was betrayal of the Head of the Salvadorean Church. The Pope's interferences in Polish politics is well known. It is interesting that the Opus Dei (and the Vatican) helping the Croats financially to buy arms during the Kosovo crisis is shown by Samuel Huntington in his book, 'The Clash of Civilizations' as a decision taken on civilizational lines. Vatican is definitely at the service of the West and against other civilizations.

In Sri Lanka when the separatist problem of the Tamil terrorists emerged the so-called International Community (the West) got interested in it (as cat's paw?) and of course the Church too got involved in it. (7) But when twice the Sinhala youth rose in revolt the International Community was not interested and, as you can guess, neither did the Church take any interest in them.

The early missionaries, for no fault of them, were under the illusion that there was no salvation outside the Church. So they were hell-bent on baptizing as many as possible as fast as possible by hook or by crook, and at the same time zealously destroying temples and kovils: invaluable deposits of cultural and artistic heritage of Asia. (8) Vandalism has no excuse. But in these enlightened times if the Church (uninculturated of course) in the guise of religious administration carries on the hidden political agenda of promoting globalization of Western culture and religion undermining and destroying indigenous cultures and religions; could it be ethically and morally defensible? This is what the non-Christian Asia perceives in the Church and in Christianity. The vanguard of globalization seems to be spreading the hegemony of Western culture and religion worldwide.

We, the Asian Christians feel embarrassed often. Personally, living in the midst of Buddhists I can sometimes almost hear them thinking, 'traitor'. They will never say it to you, but make you feel it. The silent accusation is: 'You are betraying your own people and your civilization'. The fault is with us. We have only talked and talked about inculturation, and somewhat dabbled in it, but never seriously got down to it, come what may. And we never questioned the Church about its political image and activity and for whose benefit it is. So I plead with the Asian Christian Theologians and Thinkers to find ways and means of saving Jesus and His Good News for Asia by de-identifying Jesus from the West and giving Him a truly Asian identity even at the risk of excommunication. We may make a few mistakes but the Status Quo is the biggest mistake of all.

Footnotes

1. Daily News. February 4 and 10, 1997.
2. in Asian characters
3. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period: Vol. II: (document) No. 41: J. de Salanova, S.J. to C. Acquaviva, S.J.: Ed. V. Perniola, S.J. “Hence it follows that if we wish to have any conversations it is necessary that we annex more and more territories” (the full document is very interesting reading)
4. A Study of History: Arnold J. Teynbee: Oxford University Press 1955: Vol. VIII: Pg. 321: footnote 5: “...the imprudent Spaniard had declared (to the Japanese) that Spain’s first move towards getting possession of any non-Western country on which she has political designs was to send missionaries to promote the formation of a native Christian party there which would serve, when the time came, as a spear-head for Spanish aggression.”
5. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period: Vol. III: Nos 1 and 87: Ed. V. Perniola, S.J.: “During the conquest of this Orient the two powers, secular and ecclesiastical, were so closely united that rarely did one move without the other... Thus the two powers always worked in unison... This can be seen in a special way in the island of Ceilao,...”
 - Information passed to the Portuguese by Fra Francisco Negro OFM in Kandy: ...he wrote that as soon as they had crossed the river, they should press on toward the city, for he let them know that the King had no more than 300 native troops, because he had sent the bulk of the army to Jafanapatao.

6. The Chinese Rites Controversy- Its History and Meaning: Ed. by D.E. Mungello:
Monumente Serica: Monograph Series XXXIII: pg. 287.

7. first line in Asian characters.

Archbishop Malcolm Rangith, residing in the Vatican calls on the Government to lift the ban on the terrorist outfit, L.T.T.E. six months before the actual lifting under pressures from the Norwegians (and the West) by the government.

8. The Catholic Church in Sri Lanka: The Portuguese Period: Vol. II: No. 54 157/8-9:

“Destruction of temples of Madampe and Dondra: “...destroy the idols, of which there were more than a thousand of diverse ferns, some of clay, others of wood, others of copper, and many of the gilt.....destroying their vaults and cloisters.....preceded to sack the store houses, in which they found much ivory, fine clothes, copper, pepper, sandalwood, jewels, precious stones, and ornaments of the temples, and of everything they took what they liked, and to the rest they set fire, by which the whole was consumed. And for greater insult to the temple, they slaughtered inside several cows..” (not content with destroying and looting they even desecrated the temples)

Destruction of the temple at Munneswaram: “...Father Provincial (Jesuit) came here and spoke to Father Lambert about destroying the temple... Father Lambert went with many people and with handspikes... They broke and destroyed everything and the Cross of the Lord was set up...Father Provincial ordered that for the Church they should use the building and the floor of the temple, as both were very suitable for it. For the building of the temple was very rich and beautifully ornamented and of great artistic value...”

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12.12.2002
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