

THE GOSPEL, COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Becoming Communities of the Kingdom in Tamilnadu (India) Today

by Michael Amaladoss

»That they all may be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me« (John 17:21), prayed Jesus after the last supper, that great symbol of service, sharing and community. »There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus« (Gal. 3:28), proclaimed Paul writing to the Galatians. But one has to confess that this vision of community is far from realization in Tamilnadu, in the south east of India, even after 500 years of Christian presence. The liberation movement launched by the Dalit Christians some years ago protesting against their exclusion and oppression in the Christian community and in the wider society has highlighted this lack of community.¹ The Dalits are the untouchables who are treated as slaves and who do not have normal social intercourse with other communities. Tension and disunity even among priests belonging to various castes show that the Dalits are not the only ones feeling discriminated against. One can say that the sense of community has never taken root in the Tamilnadu Church in the face of the apparently unchangeable caste system. The caste system then can be taken as a challenge for the Church's continuing mission in India today. Before we rush in with solutions for the problem, we have to understand and analyze our failure in the past to see whether it can show us where we have failed and in which direction we should move. The caste, unfortunately, is not a new problem. However it is not my intention here to offer an elaborate history of the past 500 years with regard to the experience of this problem in the Church. I shall limit myself to an examination of a few studies made by anthropologists in recent years as a starting point for my own reflection.

¹ Cf. M. AMALADOSS, *A Call to Community. The Caste System and Christian Responsibility* (Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1994).

The Legitimation of the Caste System in the Church

When the missionaries came to India 500 years ago they were faced with a society which was hierarchically structured according to the caste system. The fisherpeople along the eastern coast were the first to be converted by the Portuguese missionaries. Following the missionary custom and policy of the time they embraced not only the religion but also the culture of the Portuguese, adopting their names, dress, food and other habits. Thus the first missionaries created culturally foreign enclaves all along the coast. As a matter of fact the fisherfolk were on the margins of the caste system.² The caste system was a strong force particularly among the agricultural communities in the interior. Landlords and princes were served by untouchable agricultural labourers, other low caste warriors and upper caste brahmin priests. The fisherfolk did not (and do not) belong to this hierarchy, since they lived and worked by themselves on the sea coast. They are however not untouched by the system, since there are hierarchical differences between quasi-caste groups within their own community. If equivalences are established with the other castes more inland, they would be at the lower levels of the hierarchy. By becoming culturally ›Portuguese‹ and thus ›foreign‹ they jeopardized their position further and became outcastes, probably because they began eating also beef. Christianity itself was considered a religion for the outcastes.

In this situation one can understand the reaction of Roberto de Nobili in the 17th century.³ He wanted to assert that the Gospel was Good News for all, also for the higher castes. He wanted to emphasize further that one need not become a *phiranghee* (foreigner) in order to be a disciple of Jesus. One can be an Indian and a Christian. To make this point clear he distinguished between religion and culture — as many still do today — and declared that one can be culturally Indian and religiously Christian. He considered the prevalent social stratification as part of the culture and accepted it as such. Coming from Europe which still had a feudal social order and aware, probably, of the system of slavery practised in America even by communities of Religious, he may not have seen the caste system as unchristian. This policy was continued by subsequent missionaries systematically. There were special missionaries for different caste groups. The castes had special places in the Church. The missionaries were just conforming to an existing social system, as the early Church chose to live with the social institution of slavery. One could be critical of Roberto de Nobili today in retrospect. But one has to recognize that the step he took for affirming the cultural identity of the Indian Christians was a historic one. Otherwise we would not be here today to talk about it.

Looking back at the history of the last 500 years, one has the impression that the caste system itself was not quite as rigid as it seems to be today. There were internal movements

² Cf. KALPANA RAM, *Mukkuvar Women*, New Delhi 1992.

³ Cf. S. RAJAMANICKAM, *The First Oriental Scholar*, Tirunelveli 1972.

within the hierarchical order.⁴ The main framework held, with the Brahmins at the top and the Dalits at the bottom. The two other twice-born castes besides Brahmins, namely the *kshatriyas* (warriors) and the *vaisyas* (traders) were not present in the South. Those who were neither Brahmin nor Dalit were considered *Sudras* (labourers). They could be farmers, soldiers, etc. But there was a tension between the land owning and the local warrior castes for supremacy.⁵ Whichever group acquired economic and political power sought to move up in the caste hierarchy. One of the forms that this struggle for upward mobility took was the search to establish a special relationship to the Sacred, given the fact that ritual purity and pollution was one of the determinants of position in the caste system. People who attained economic and/or political dominance in a particular area saw in the temple, mosque or church one way of legitimizing and declaring their new social status. Either they built new temples or generously endowed existing ones so that they became patrons of these temples. This patronage was recognized by the priests of the temple who gave them priority in the distribution of ritual »honours« either when they visited the temple or on the occasion of festivals. These »honours« may take various forms. When *prasad* – the gifts of food offered to God and so blessed by God – was distributed to the devotees, the patron may receive more than the others or the best parts of it. He may be the first to receive it. His position closer to or distant from the sanctuary, within or outside the temple, can also be significant. On the occasion of the annual festival involving the whole community he may have the privilege of starting the car procession with the first pull at the rope. Thus the distribution of temple »honours« can indicate social hierarchy. Kings and princes extended their patronage to the Sacred within their realm, irrespective of its religious affiliation. Thus a Hindu may do favours or offer protection to and therefore receive »honours« from a Christian Church. A Moslem may similarly receive honours from a Hindu temple. It was primarily a socio-political relationship to the Sacred, recognized as such by the people. The personal faith of the patron was not seen as relevant. The priest as the distributor of the temple »honours« was in a position to affirm or refuse to recognize the social status of such patrons. One cannot say that he conferred such status. But he certainly recognized and so legitimated the existing power structure by sacralizing it. But where two groups are engaged in conflict for status, the priest may play a determinant role, especially at lower regional or village levels, since the pattern reproduced itself also at lower levels. This was particularly so at the time of the village festival, which symbolically reproduced the existing social structure of the community.

Some recent anthropological research has shown that this was also the case with regard to Christian Churches in Tamilnadu. It has been suggested that a motif for conversion could have been the possibility of acceding to such »honours« in a new ritual setting, unavailable in the old one. The kind of role played by big temples can be played by

⁴ Cf. JAMES SILVERBERG (ed.), *Social Mobility in the Caste System in India*, The Hague 1968; M.N. SRINIVAS, *Social Change in Modern India*, New Delhi 1966.

⁵ Cf. SUSAN BAYLY, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700–1900*, Cambridge 1989.

Churches in relation to petty local chieftains of the area or to rival caste groups vying for status. Sometimes the priests seem to have used this role to reward loyalty or to promote limited social change. The presence of two clerical power centres in the area, namely those deriving their jurisdiction from Bishops owing loyalty to the King of Portugal, namely the *padroado* missionaries and others deriving their jurisdiction from the more recent Bishops appointed by the *Propaganda Fide* added to the tension and confusion. The two sets of priests were trying to gain control over Churches and parishes and, in the process, were favouring one or other caste group according to its perceived loyalty to themselves. Let us have a brief look at some cases before proceeding with our reflection.

Some Case Studies

Vadakankulam has a catholic community of Nadars.⁶ But they are rather low in the caste hierarchy. The Jesuit missionaries in the 18th century who followed the option taken after de Nobili to respect the caste hierarchy wanted to appoint only the higher caste Vellalas to leadership positions in the Church. They appointed a Vellala catechist. A Vellala migration strengthened the presence of the community in the village. They monopolized all the Church honours: accompanying the missionary on his tours, handling the sacred vessels, assisting the priest at mass, sitting near the sanctuary, presiding over the daily prayer in the absence of the priest, leading the village festival, controlling the collection of festival tax, etc. As the economic status of the Nadars rose, thanks to trade and other factors, this domination of the Vellalas was contested. There were repeated agitations and riots. Conversion to Protestantism or even to Hinduism was used by both sides as a threat. In the 19th century, under the more egalitarian attitudes of the French missionaries, probably after the French revolution, efforts were made to apportion the honours equally between the two castes. This divisive equality found expression in a new Church built in 1872. It had a railing down the middle which divided the sacred space according to caste considerations. The Nadars however were still unhappy because they were classed with other lower castes. In 1910 the railing was pulled down and an uneasy tension between the two groups continues, though the priests after 1910 chose to adopt a neutral stance, sometimes antagonizing in this way both groups. This whole dispute however left the Dalits or castes lower in the social hierarchy completely outside the picture.

Suranam is another village in which the local hierarchy was respected while distributing the 'honours' at the time of the village festival.⁷ The first 'honour' actually went to the Hindu village headmen. Thus the festival legitimized the hierarchy, not only in the Christian community, but in the village community as such. The dominant community at

⁶ Cf. SUSAN BAYLY, op. cit.

⁷ Cf. DAVID MOSSE, *Caste, Christianity and Hinduism: A Study of Social Organization and Religion in Rural Ramnad*. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1986; IDEM., 'Idioms of Subordination and Styles of Protest among Christian and Hindu Harijan Castes in Tamil Nadu', in: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (n.s.) 28, 1 (1994) 67-106.

the time was Vellala. The Utaiyars, with increasing economic power, contested this dominance. Here, however, the priest eventually succeeded in asserting his authority over the Church and its sacred space, thus assuming a ›kingly‹ besides ›priestly‹ role. From this powerful position, he decreed equal honours to the two castes around 1915, so that each caste could assume the leadership during the village festival in alternate years. In 1936 the role of the Hindu village headman was successfully challenged so that the non-Christians were excluded from receiving ›honours‹, though they could still participate in the festival on an individual basis to obtain the blessing of the patron of the village, who, in this instance, is St. James. In this manner the festival itself, from being a village one, becomes a merely Christian one. In Suranam there is a group of Dalit Pallars. In the present century as social awareness grew, thanks to the independence movement, they also claimed recognition and a share in the honours. Since they made financial contributions to the celebration of the festival, they also had a right to them. They slowly gained a share not only in the celebration of the village festival in honour of St. James, by skilful use of disputes between the higher castes, but also assumed control of a secondary festival in honour of Our Lady of Lourdes, but not without struggle and not without the support of the priest. After Indian independence in 1947, there is at least legal equality of all citizens and the Pallars get organized to assert their rights not only in the religious, but also in the social sphere. In 1982 the Bishops in Tamilnadu decided to abolish the system of ›honours‹ altogether all over Tamilnadu. When the priest in Suranam accordingly suppressed all caste roles in the village festival, the Christian festival became effectively an ecclesiastical one. This means that participation was determined not in terms of one's place in society, but in terms of one's relation to the Church, which meant in practice to the clergy. Thus the festival becomes merely religious, losing its social role in the village altogether. The social hierarchy however will still be evident in who controls the decision making and who contributes what services to the celebration. The Pallar aspirations for social equality now takes the form of political organization and mobilization, but outside the ecclesiastical sphere.

Viragalur is a village with Christians belonging to four different higher castes and to other lower ones.⁸ Following a conflict for dominance as in other villages, which led to the suppression of the festival itself for a number of years, the castes agreed to a rotation system. This agreement reflects also a change in the economic balance among the different caste groups. But the Dalits are still marginalized. They are not even allowed to contribute to the village festival. They have their own festival which they can control. The efforts of the parish priest to promote social equality is limited to the sacred space. He has succeeded in abolishing caste distinctions in the manner of participating in the liturgy and other events in the Church. But he has no control over the village festival. A suggestion by him that funds be raised for the festival also from the Dalits was rejected by the higher caste groups. Here too the caste rivalry is finding expression increasingly in the political sphere.

⁸ Cf. M. JOE BRITTO, *The Role of Celebrations in Social Change with Reference to a Village Catholic Festival* (unpublished Ph.D. thesis at Delhi, Vidyajyoti, 1995).

The Sacred and the Secular

These are but few examples of similar stories of conflicts in many other villages across Tamilnadu. I have also kept the stories to a brief, essential, outline. In all these stories we can notice a process. The Church starts off, not only recognizing, but actively supporting the caste hierarchy. The clamour for change in the beginning does not come from the priest in the name of the Gospel, but from the caste groups that feel oppressed. The cause is often the growing economic equality that searches also for equality in social status. The priest is then obliged to engineer many compromises. But he still has the power to confer status. All this movement happens mostly in the sacred space. But what happens there reflects the reality outside. The social hierarchical system itself is not touched. But formerly oppressed groups achieve some upward mobility within the system. In the early years of this century there is a change in the ideology and policy, particularly of the foreign clergy. The priests actively promote social equality. But they do not always succeed. The practice of assigning separate places in Churches and cemeteries and of allowing limited access to public roles in the liturgy like reading, serving the priest at the Eucharist, etc. to lower castes continue. Even where success is possible it is limited to the sacred sphere. Both the choice of the Church and the new social situation in a secular democratic country promote a growing separation between the Church and the social order. The struggles for upward caste mobility now take place not so much in the sacred, but in the socio-political sphere. The case of the Dalits however is different as they are still largely marginalized not only in society but also in the Church.

In recent years, new political power centres have emerged. The traditional elite are losing their position to the new rich who have acquired wealth through other means than traditional agriculture, like trade, jobs in the Government or in the Army, job-oriented migration, etc. In this new situation the basis of status claims itself is changing. A local political party leader may have more status than the local rich man or landlord. The status is now acquired not through one's connection to the Sacred, but to the new centre of power which is the State. In the emerging secular society of India the separation between the sacred and the secular is becoming a reality and the sacred is being progressively limited to its own sphere — if not yet fully privatized.

But by building a new sacred space for himself and his activities the priest is also losing any effective link to the secular world. He does not have the same influence any more to bring about changes in secular society. He can do what he wants within the Church compound. His powers effectively end at the gates of the compound. We seem to have come full circle. De Nobili distinguished between religion and culture. But religion accepted and thus, in some way, legitimized cultural structures. Now we have come to a situation where the break between religion and culture as social structures is complete. But the consequence is that religion does not have any more influence in the secular sphere. This is of course very similar to the growing institutional isolation of the Church in Europe and elsewhere. Without any involvement in, even a bridge to, culture what happens to the Church's mission of inculturation as transformation of culture?

A Church of the Laity

This impasse should lead us to the ›discovery‹ or ›re-discovery‹ that the Church is not primarily the Church institution or building or the sacred space around it. Nor is it the clergy, whatever their authority and power within the institution may be. The Church is primarily the People. This is so both within the Church and particularly in relation to the world. Their presence to the world will not be authentic or effective if they have no responsibility also in the Church.

Our first task then is to facilitate the emergence of an authentic Christian community as the People of God. For the past 500 years, the strategy of evangelization has been to teach the truths of the faith to the people in a simplified catechetical form and to encourage their participation in liturgical life. Liturgy too was formalized, focusing more on the celebration of divine mysteries than on celebrating life. Conversion was mostly seen in personal moral terms related to the sacrament of personal reconciliation with God, rather than with others. The people's real socio-psychological needs were not catered to. So they not only continued many socio-religious customs linked to life-cycle rituals. They also developed thriving popular devotions. All this amounted to parallel religious practice introducing a dichotomy between a higher religion occupied with problems of salvation and a popular religion catering to more mundane, often personal, needs.⁹ The public sphere was left out of consideration altogether. Now is the time to change the strategy and to enable the people to encounter the Gospel and to let it transform the whole of their life, not only as individuals but also as a community. The transformative power of the Gospel must reach particularly their cultural structures as social relationship and organization.

The Church in the World

This process of responding to the Gospel is best done, not by the clergy but by the people, not in the sacred atmosphere of the liturgy but in struggling with the realities of the world, its injustices and discriminations, its marginalizations and dominations. It will take seriously Christ's challenge not only to be poor in the light of the Beatitudes, but to opt for the poor and to struggle with them for the liberation of all. In perceiving the counter-cultural impact of the Gospel on the world, they will also perceive its counter-cultural demands in their own lives and community.

One concrete way of doing this is to encourage inter-caste basic communities and then use them as agents of transformation in the community. They can practice what they preach. I think that it is important to launch this as a lay movement, not only because the clerics are also in need of conversion and transformation, but also because any sacraliza-

⁹ Cf. DAVID MOSSE, »Catholic Saints and the Hindu Village Pantheon in Rural Tamil Nadu«, *Man* (n.s.) 29 (1994) 301–332; IDEM., »Roman Catholicism and Hindu Village Society in Tamil Nadu, India« in: CHARLES STEWART and ROSALIND SHAW (eds.), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism. The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, London 1994, 85–107.

tion or formalism may deroute the process of social transformation. One should not forget that the clergy in the past not only legitimized the caste system but actively promoted the status of the higher castes in the sacred sphere and consequently in society.

Today the Dalits too are demanding equality and community.¹⁰ But in a hierarchical society where they are economically, socially and politically oppressed they will never achieve it themselves. They will have to have the support of all people of good will, because status mobility is a matter also of social recognition. In the sacred sphere, the clergy with their authority can play a positive role. The oppressed would need such support from those in power. This will be a way of promoting authentic inculturation where the Gospel is really transforming culture in the very process of incarnating itself in it.

The liturgy too must change from being a formalistic celebration of the divine mysteries under the control of the clergy to the celebration of life by the people in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ which is transforming it. It will be organized by the people themselves with the clergy playing a role of service and facilitation. For example, the Eucharist is a symbol of fellowship and sharing in the community. It is in the celebration of such community that Christ becomes present in his paschal mystery. Both aspects must go together. If we look at it only as the celebration of the paschal mystery, then it becomes fruitless. If we see it only as the celebration of community then it loses its Christian authenticity and mystery. This means that if a community is not really together or at least is not actively trying to overcome its divisions it has no right to celebrate the Eucharist. St. Paul had made this clear to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 11:17–34).

In order to promote real inculturation the gap between the Gospel and culture needs to be abolished. But it is not done by acculturating the culture to the Gospel or to its current expression in the institutional Church, but by the Gospel losing itself in the culture and finding itself in a new way.

Challenging the Caste System

Let us briefly look at an important dimension of this self-emptying. In a place like Suranam the Church had the power to legitimate the local social hierarchy, which included both the Hindus and the Christians. Then this power was limited to the Christians. Finally it was lost altogether. In the meantime there is a new democratic socio-political order. The broader social conflicts have shifted their arena of operation. Caste struggles still continue in the Church. But they are limited to the sacred space. The Dalits are claiming greater participation and power. The other castes are fighting among themselves for the scarce resources offered by the Church through its institutions in terms of jobs and development projects. But in society as a whole the Church as an institution, represented by the clergy,

¹⁰ Cf. M.E. PRABHAKAR (ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi 1989; ANTONY RAJ, *Children of a Lesser God (Dalit Christians)*, Madurai 1992; A.P. NIRMAL, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras, n.d.; JAMES MASSEY (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples: Dalits. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, Delhi 1994.

is no longer a force. The initiative and the capacity to do anything therefore passes on to the Church as the People, as I have pointed to above. The caste system is not merely a Christian phenomenon, but an Indian one, that affects all religious groups in the country. The Church as people cannot do anything to transform the socio-cultural order except by collaborating with other religious groups and with all people of good will who want a change. The Church is no longer the sole player in the field. As a small minority group it will have no impact if it were to act alone.

The socio-cultural structure, like the caste system, that we wish to transform is not the possession of one particular group. Even if we have passed a hegemonic stage in which the oppressed accept their oppression because they have interiorized the oppressive structures and have now entered a conflictual stage where the oppressed are demanding change, change in a socio-cultural structure cannot be brought about unless the whole social group is somehow involved. It is true that the real drive for change is coming from the oppressed groups. But in opting to work with such groups, the Church cannot afford to neglect a continuing dialogue with the other social groups, especially searching for collaboration from people of good will from among them.

Though the Church's option for the poor demands that the Church work with the oppressed groups for the liberation of all, it will not be an easy task. Working actively with them does not necessarily mean simply following their leadership. Some in this group may aim at immediate economic benefits. Others seem to be aiming at greater social respectability and upward mobility within the existing caste system rather than attempting to change the system itself. The caste system itself may be undergoing subtle changes. From constituting a rigid hierarchical order, if they ever were, the castes seem to be becoming rival groups competing for scarce resources. In a democratic order they seem to be strengthening their identity, even bringing together other castes in geographical or hierarchical proximity so as to defend more effectively their common economic and political interests by constituting voting blocks at the time of the elections. Even the Dalits seem to have a vested interest in remaining such in order to benefit by the affirmative action programmes of the government. The Church-people therefore will have to enter into a very ambiguous scene and make also occasionally ambiguous choices, but keeping the freedom of constantly monitoring the situation and of discernment. The alternative of course would be to do nothing.

One way in which the Church-people can help the wider community is of course to show by example how a group of people belonging to different castes, including Dalits, can actually live and work together as social equals rising beyond caste distinctions. I do not know whether the caste system would ever disappear completely. Since each caste has a subculture of its own, they may continue as kin groups, even if they no longer constitute a hierarchy. But we should certainly aim at doing away with its discriminatory, hierarchical and ascriptive aspects. The Church-people can actively promote such a change within itself. In this manner it can be a counter-cultural presence within the wider community, being so not merely critically but providing a constructive alternative. The Church-institution can play a role in inspiring such action from the perspective of the Good News.

Changing Context and Methods for Mission

I think that this is a new situation in mission. Both the caste system and the position of the Church in society are changing. Therefore any apostolic action in the wider society will have to be inventive and creative, taking into account the new factors. I shall limit myself to a few suggestions.

The Church has a network of educational institutions. It can make it a priority to conscientize all the students who pass through our schools. Such awareness can be promoted in an experiential, and therefore effective, manner by involving them in social programmes aimed at the social promotion of the Dalits even in a limited way and the social equality of all caste group in specific situations.

Secondly the Church can act in solidarity with the Dalits. We have seen above that social equality became possible where caste groups were attaining a certain economic equality and where the pressure for change came from below. To be in solidarity with the Dalits can concretely mean helping them to improve their economic status in every way and through that their social status. Another way of building them up would be to defend their basic human freedom and rights. Atrocities against Dalits individually and in groups are still common. One also see that sometimes political forces and the police join with the dominant caste groups. We can see how we can defend their just human rights in such situations, trying at the same time to promote peace with justice among the conflicting caste groups.

At a wider level, there are various groups and forces in the country that seek to promote social equality. The Christians should not seek to act alone, but join forces with all people of good will in struggling for a good cause. The Church may not always be in the lime light in such situations. But the Church must be ready for humble service.

Conclusion: Gospel and Culture

These general suggestions for action provoke some reflections from a missiological point of view. Speaking about inculturation one tends to focus on the need for the Church to become Indian. One forgets the need for the Gospel also to challenge and transform culture. The Gospel can never become identified with a culture. Therefore incarnation may be a too strong paradigm to reflect on such a process. Perhaps one should look at it rather as an ongoing dialogue between Gospel and culture. This seems even more obvious if we realize that Gospel and culture are not in a one-to-one relationship in India. Indian culture is actually ›animated‹ by a multiplicity of religions. There is also the growing differentiation between the socio-cultural and the religious institutions and structures in a secular democratic order. Therefore while the Church can act alone in becoming Indian, it can work for the transformation of the socio-cultural order only in collaboration with other believers and all people of good will. Inculturation cannot also be seen as a means of

increasing membership in the Church. Seeing a Church that is more Indian, committed to the poor and the oppressed and struggling on their side, people may be attracted to become disciples of Jesus. But the Church can no longer have the ›glory‹ of acting alone. This is true today even of the so-called Christian countries. It is much more so in a multi-religious country like India.

One special problem is that the ideal of community in India has come to be identified with religion, thanks to Muslim and later British domination and to the continuing animosities between India and Pakistan. Given the strong presence of the caste system as structuring the Hindu religious community and the use of the caste communities as objects of affirmative action by the government and as vote-banks, it is becoming difficult to think of community except in terms of caste and religion.¹¹ The consequence is that if the Church strongly affirms its identity by separating itself as a community from other communities, then it unwittingly reduces itself to becoming another community characterized by religious affiliation. In practice, it simply becomes another caste in a particular area. At that stage it loses all power as a prophetic symbol and force for promoting community. The challenge for the Church today in India is, therefore, how to be a community of the Kingdom that transcends caste and even religious identity in a wider community that is riven by caste and religious identities.

One speaks sometimes of a ›liminal‹ community. But a liminal existence is hard to live over a long period without a clear orientation and commitment. It can hardly coexist with an aggressive policy of evangelization which antagonizes every one. Neither can it survive as a liminal community if one seeks to structure it as a strong, well organized, hierarchical institution, with overt or covert roots outside the country. I think that I do not exaggerate when I say that being a community of the Gospel is a very, if not the most, important challenge that the Church-people has to face in India today. It becomes further problematic when five hundred years of history are not seen as a tradition to live by, but as a model to reject. Our loyalty to Jesus and his good news demands that we continue to search how best we can be communities of the Kingdom in today's India.

Summary

Jesus proclaimed a new community of equals. But the early missionaries in India accepted the hierarchical caste system as a social, not a religious, phenomenon. But the system was legitimized and sacralized through the custom of distributing ritual honours controlled by religious functionaries. More recent efforts by the Catholic clergy to promote equality have had some success only in the sacred sphere over which they have control. In the process religion itself has lost its role in society. The oppressed castes now take to

¹¹ Cf. GERALD JAMES LARSON, *India's Agony over Religion*, Albany 1995. T.K. John has an extensive and reflective review of the book in ›Today's India and its Religions‹, in: *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 60 (1996) 12–30.

political organization and action to claim their equal rights as citizens of a secular democracy. This situation is a challenge to the Gospel to become a force for socio-cultural transformation, mediated by the Church which seeks to live the Kingdom ideal of community.