

## College of the Holy Cross CrossWorks

---

Religious Studies Faculty Scholarship

Religious Studies Department

---

3-2011

# The Faith and Rationality of Dalit Christian Experience

Mathew N. Schmalz

*College of the Holy Cross*, [mschmalz@holycross.edu](mailto:mschmalz@holycross.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel\\_faculty\\_pub](http://crossworks.holycross.edu/rel_faculty_pub)

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Christian Denominations and Sects Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Schmalz, Mathew N. "The Faith and Rationality of Dalit Christian Experience." *Asian Horizons* 5.1 (2011): 24-35.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religious Studies Department at CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of CrossWorks.

# THE FAITH AND RATIONALITY OF DALIT CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

**Mathew N. Schmalz**♦

## 1. Intelligibility

Schmalz: When did you become Christian? [in Hindi]

Rashmi: When my son was five years old. [in Bhojpuri]

Schmalz: Prabhunath, what did she say? [in Hindi]<sup>1</sup>

In his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II observes that faith and rationality belong to the essence of Christianity: rationality without faith courts nihilism, while faith without rationality conjures superstition. As love of wisdom, philosophy shows “in different modes and forms that the desire for truth is part of human nature itself.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, each culture has its own “seminal wisdom” that finds expression in forms that are “genuinely philosophical.”<sup>3</sup> For John Paul II, the philosophical traditions of India constitute a

---

♦**Mathew N. Schmalz** Mathew N. Schmalz is Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Director of the College Honors Program at the College of the Holy Cross, Worcester, Massachusetts, USA. His primary areas of research and publication are Global Catholicism, South Asian Studies, and Modern Religious Movements. He is co-author of *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances* (SUNY Press) and regularly writes for the Washington Post website “On Faith.” Schmalz lived as a student and researcher for four years in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Email: mschmalz@holycross.edu

<sup>1</sup> Rashmi is a pseudonym. Quotations and references from my interviews with her are from transcripts from my interviews with her. Translations are my own. Research was conducted in 1994-1996 and 2000, funded by grants from The Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Program, the American Institute of Indian Studies, and the Wabash Centre. I also briefly discuss Rashmi’s conversion to Catholicism in Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Catholic Tactics of Marginality at a North Indian Mission,” *History of Religions* 44 (February 2005) 216-251.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio: On the Relationship between Faith and Reason*, Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1998, art. 3, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 3, p. 11.

“particularly rich heritage” from which Christians could draw “the elements compatible with their faith, in order to enrich Christian thought.”<sup>4</sup> Such an attempt must be discerning, recognizing the universality of the human aspiration for truth while resisting the tendency to place Indian philosophy on the equivalent of an intellectual island by allowing it to “remain closed in its difference.”<sup>5</sup>

Rashmi had seen John Paul II over a decade before he promulgated *Fides et Ratio*. She travelled to Delhi by bus from her home near a Catholic mission in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. At that papal mass in February 1986, Rashmi could not understand the Holy Father’s homily, even though parts of it were read in Hindi, by John Paul himself and by Rashmi’s diocesan bishop, Patrick D’Souza. Born as an Untouchable in the Hindi-speaking heartland, Rashmi understood only Bhojpuri and never had the opportunity to learn to read and write. Because of this, it would be tempting to dismiss the relevance of any notion of philosophy, or reason, for Rashmi’s experience as a Catholic convert. After all, some might very well argue, Untouchables like Rashmi have a simple “faith” that does not see the subtle “rationality” connecting philosophy and theology. Philosophy might very well address the experience of Untouchability, but Untouchables themselves do not philosophize.

John Paul wrote *Fides et Ratio* in part to combat a variety of “errors” and “distortions” that beset and confound contemporary intellectual reflection. Citing a litany of philosophical perspectives for their unreflective separation of faith from reason, John Paul II criticizes “historicism” as particularly threatening.<sup>6</sup> For John Paul II, historicism challenges the very idea of truth by treating every philosophical claim as historically conditioned and contingent.<sup>7</sup> Intellectual enquiry thus becomes nothing more than archaeology; historicism relativizes human thought by considering any intellectual speculation irrelevant or unintelligible beyond specific temporal and cultural parameters. But treating philosophy seriously means taking truth seriously. By extension, human experience is not simply self-referential or self-enclosed. Human experience partakes in the universal and thus our own irreducible individuality does not constitute an unbridgeable gap in understanding.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., art. 72, p. 91.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., art. 72, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> Included among these are “eclecticism,” “pragmatism,” “scientism,” and “nihilism.” See art. 86-91, pp. 108-113.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., art. 86, p. 109.

All of this is fine to say in theory, but it was the gap between me and Rashmi that became most apparent when I began a series of interviews with her over fifteen years ago. In our initial encounters, it became immediately clear that I couldn't understand her dialect of Bhojpuri and she couldn't understand my accented Hindi. In fact, I often needed her son Prabhunath as an interlocutor. The intelligibility issues did not end there—I was from America, a country that Rashmi had heard of, but could not locate. Likewise, I had no experiential referent for understanding Rashmi's life as an Untouchable.

If we take the perspective of *Fides et Ratio* seriously, then we have to view unintelligibility not as a wall that can never be scaled, but as a door that may be opened. As then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger observed after the encyclical was promulgated, the question of truth "is necessarily directed to the problem of cultures and their mutual openness."<sup>8</sup> That cultures can mutually inform one another is the central supposition informing John Paul's exhortation for Christianity to seriously consider Indian philosophy. For John Paul II, philosophy is an integral part of the work of human self-transcendence and cultures and individuals can, and do, meet precisely in their efforts to transcend themselves. In what follows, I would like to re-present and reflect upon Rashmi's understanding of herself and Christianity through the lens of *Fides et Ratio* and its discussion of truth and culture. In tentatively offering some final thoughts on the task of theology, I wish to emphasize how the faith and rationality of Christian Untouchables like Rashmi can be an important resource for the intellectual labor that *Fides et Ratio* commends.

## 2. Truth

Schmalz: In your opinion (*vichar*), who's a "true Christian" (*saccha Isai*)?

Rashmi: A "true Christian" (*saccha Isai*) is someone who depends upon the Lord (*Prabhu*). A person who does worship (*puja*) and stays on the Lord's path – that's a true Christian.

For John Paul II, human beings are truth seekers. Philosophy is an outgrowth of that yearning for truth since it seeks answers to the most basic questions: "Who am I? Where do I come from? What is there after life?"<sup>9</sup> When I sat down with Rashmi and Prabunath, it was clear that abstract questions such as these only deepened the

---

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, "Culture and Truth: Some Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*," *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), 369.

<sup>9</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, art. 1, p. 9.

problem of intelligibility. Of course, academic forms of philosophizing often rely upon abstruse technical language. But while specific philosophical categories might have been alien to Rashmi, the concept of truth was not. For Rashmi, truth was not a concept suspended in the air or held in the gray matter of the brain as a purely mental construct. Instead, truth was embodied: embodied in Christ but also reflected in the lives of those who conform themselves to Him. Hers was a notion of truth as praxis, although her son, as we will see, would frame the issue somewhat differently.

Rashmi was born into the Untouchable Chamar caste. Like many in rural eastern Uttar Pradesh, she does not know her birthdate. Her son, Prabhunath, was seventeen when I first met him in 1994. At that time Rashmi was probably in her late early 50s, although she looked much older. She lived with Prabhunath in a one room mud hut in a segregated Chamar colony outside the main village. When Prabhunath was a child, the colony had no hand pump for water, and so Rashmi and other residents of the colony would have to draw water from a nearby river where they would also bathe and do their laundry. Rashmi worked in the fields during the wheat and rice harvests and would also serve as a midwife for the local Brahmin landowning caste. Her remuneration was a portion of grain or rice for her manual labour in the fields and iron bangles and a cotton sari for work as a midwife. The caste name Chamar comes from the word for "skin," and many of Rashmi's relatives were tanners, although she herself was not engaged in the practice.

Rashmi was not born a Catholic Christian. Roman Rite Canadian Capuchins had come to the area in her youth, but she had little to do with the local mission, even after it passed into the hands of the Indian Missionary Society in the 1960s. Soon after Prabhunath was born, Rashmi's husband died and she assumed sole responsibility for his upbringing. By that time, India's green revolution had lessened the prospect of famine, but Rashmi's family still lived at the level of subsistence. The situation became so difficult at one point that Rashmi's father and brother had to go to the nearest city, Ghazipur, and beg for money on the streets. That effort was both short lived and unsuccessful; the two were promptly arrested and escorted out of the city after several nights in jail.

When Prabhunath was five, he developed a fever and Rashmi took him to the Catholic mission's medial dispensary. There she prayed to the Virgin Mary and made a vow to become Christian if her son was healed. Prabhunath was indeed cured but, much to her dismay, Rashmi had to wait to be formally accepted as a Catholic Christian. A period of discernment and catechesis followed, culminating with

baptism on Christmas Eve. In retrospect, Rashmi says all of this was necessary—she would always talk about how “greedy” (*lalchi*) she was, not for material gain, but for securing well-being for her son. Her implicit point was also that while she was not a “rice Christian” in a conventional sense, she was nonetheless subject to very human feelings and needs.

When I asked her what it meant to be a “true Christian,” Rashmi emphasized someone who trusts in God and worships Him—a fairly standard catechetical answer in this part of Uttar Pradesh. When I pushed her to clarify by inquiring what it meant to be a “false Christian,” Rashmi replied that someone who goes “here and there,” to a church one day and a temple the next, is a false Christian. At this Prabhunath broke in and attempted to clarify. Calling me “brother” (*bhaiyya*), he explained to me that she really intended to say was that someone who had a true heart, and a true love for Jesus, was a “true Christian”—a person who feigned that love for gain was not. In spite of Prabhunath’s affectionate form of address to me, I must say that I was not persuaded that his mother intended to say exactly what he indicated.

Rashmi and Prabhunath’s different glosses reflect the different sociological dynamics that shaped their Christian identity. When she became Christian, Rashmi was expelled by the Chamar *panchayat*. Her understanding of being a Christian, particularly a Catholic one, was one of separateness and exclusivity. Baptized as a child, and having seen the lifting of the out-casting penalties, Prabhunath was less concerned with overt religious boundaries than with internal qualities of character and discernment that allowed him to navigate the shifting dynamics of village life. But in spite of their different emphases, Rashmi and Prabhunath were essentially speaking about fidelity. For Rashmi, that fidelity was most clearly expressed in action, particularly through partaking of the sacraments: faith without works was dead. For Prabhunath, fidelity was most clearly expressed in a devotional affect: works without faith were dead.

This discussion naturally led to Rashmi’s understanding of Jesus. When asked, Rashmi simply said, “Jesus (Yesu) is *muktidata*.” “*Muktidata*” can probably be best translated as “giver of liberation.” Not only is “*muktidata*” a title that would be familiar to many Hindus, it is also a term widely used in the Catholic charismatic movement in North India.<sup>10</sup> But what was interesting about Rashmi’s use of the

---

<sup>10</sup> On charismatic Catholicism in Rashmi’s village see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Dalit Christian Pentecostalism in a North Indian Village,” *Dalit International Newsletter* 7 (October 2001) 7-9. On North Indian charismatic Catholicism more

term was that she didn't expand the meaning of "*mukti*" to talk about heaven or union with Jesus. Instead, she shifted focus to the Eucharist and spoke about how the white bread cleanses and absorbs sin – assuming one has already begun the purification process through confession.<sup>11</sup> Since Rashmi continued to be considered "untouchable" after her conversion, this idea of Christ as purifier had a deeply meaningful resonance.

It is when this understanding of purity is connected to the understanding of fidelity that we find the essence of Rashmi's truth claim. In *Fides et Ratio*, the centrality of truth is affirmed and explicated through a variety of extended reflections on the relationship between faith and reason, mystery and intellect. Between these poles of the human response to God, Jesus Christ becomes the "definitive synthesis."<sup>12</sup> John Paul II poses the issue quite emphatically: "where might the human being seek the answer to dramatic questions such as pain, the suffering of the innocent and death, if not from the light streaming from the mystery of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection?"<sup>13</sup> For Rashmi, however, the image was not clarifying light, but cleansing water. She framed her questions differently, by implicitly asking, "what liberates me from my condition? What frees me to be a human being?" Accordingly, she would focus on different aspects of Jesus's narrative: his healing ministry, his meals with sinners, and most meaningfully, the Last Supper. Jesus is faithful to us in our humanity and our fidelity to Him attests to that truth. While there is an abstract, propositional character underlying Rashmi's understanding of Jesus, it is expressed in embodied, transactional terms through images of eating and being eaten, touching and being touched. It is, as John Paul II might say, an apprehension of Jesus that connects a universal truth claim to "the different faces of human truth."<sup>14</sup>

---

generally, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Boundaries and Appropriations in North Indian Charismatic Catholicism," *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations and Resistances*, eds. Mathew N. Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (Albany: SUNY Press, in press). See also Mathew N. Schmalz, "Charismatic Transgressions: The Life and Work of an Indian Catholic Healer," *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the Lines*, eds. Corinne G. Dempsey and Selva J. Raj, Albany: SUNY Press, 2005, 163-187.

<sup>11</sup> This is a common image among Catholics in the area surrounding Rashmi's village, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Images of the Body in the Life and Death of a North Indian Catholic Catechist," *History of Religions* 39 (November 1999) 177-201.

<sup>12</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, art. 12, p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 28, p.41.

### 3. Culture

Schmalz: How did caste begin?

Rashmi: ...The Lord sat Adam and Eve down next to him. He said, "Listen my children, because you did not listen to me I have to put you out on your own. Adam, you will have to work for your bread now. Eve, for you, giving birth will be painful. Now, my children, you have to go.

If "truth" is a controversial term within contemporary discourse, so too is culture. For example, if we use the term "Indian culture" does it mean an essential Indian spirit that all Indians share? If so, does it have an ontological status? Or is a racial construct?<sup>15</sup> In *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II does seem to imply that there is an essential quality to Eastern thought that distinguishes it from "Western" or "Greco-Roman" thought, although both reflect and partake in the universal since truth transcends culture. Of course, long before *Fides et Ratio* was promulgated, Catholic theologians sought to explore how Indian thought could enrich Catholic theology. Some, like D. S. Amalorpavadass, envisioned an Indian Catholicism more fluent in the symbols and gestures of Indian religiosity, while others, like Raimon Panikkar, more speculatively probed the boundaries of the Catholic tradition by drawing upon ancient Indian philosophical systems.<sup>16</sup> In many of these efforts, Indian was implicitly understood to be synonymous with Hindu.<sup>17</sup> Far from being an abstract philosophical exercise, any effort to attempt to define what makes Indian culture "Indian" inevitably becomes a political intervention in the often contested domain of national identity and Indian self-understanding.<sup>18</sup>

When I spoke with Rashmi, I did not have a ready word for "culture." The only word that came to mind was "*sanskriti*," which

---

<sup>15</sup> For a critique of anthropological understandings of "culture" and their implicit connection with race, see Adam Kuper, *Culture: The Anthropologists' Account*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>16</sup> For representative works, see D.S. Amalorpavadass, *The Gospel and Culture*, Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1978; Raimon Panikkar, *A Dwelling Place for Wisdom*, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> On this theme, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Ad Experimentum: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation," *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001, 161-180.

<sup>18</sup> See Mathew N. Schmalz, "The Indian Church: Catholicism and Indian Nationhood," *The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Paul Manuel, Lawrence Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006, 209-225.



can probably be best translated as “refinement.” Defined in this way, the term carries a moral valence that harkens back to pre-modern understandings of “culture” before the term became foundational for Western efforts to define and study society in its objective material and intellectual products. Even though the category “culture” was not something that could be explicitly pursued, there were numerous examples of adaptation to “Indian culture” in the life of the priests and nuns at the Catholic mission near Rashmi’s village. The mission was called an “*ashram*,” the priest wore saffron colored vestments, and the mass included rotation of an oil lamp (*arati*), offerings of flowers, and special hymns composed in Hindi and Bhojpuri. I asked Rashmi what she thought of these adaptations that born from the inculturation movement that sought to make Indian Catholicism more Indian. Like many of her fellow Catholics, Rashmi was strong and unequivocal in her disapproval of just about everything that was presented as a liturgical or theological adaptation. After all, she observed, the mission couldn’t really be an “ashram” if the priests and nuns ate meat and rode around on motorcycles.<sup>19</sup> As for the mass, Rashmi said that she really couldn’t understand the Hindi anyway and besides, she asked, didn’t Hindus do many of the same things? The point that Rashmi was making was that the Indian culture on display at the mission, and in most of North Indian Catholicism, had little to do with her. Re-presenting Rashmi’s critiques against the background of *Fides et Ratio*, we could say that the real point is not just whether culture is understood as an abstract entity or as a lived reality, but whether culture can be understood as unified whole.

It was from her own lived reality that Rashmi’s implicit understanding of culture emerged. Most obviously, Rashmi’s life was defined by the caste system. There were the restrictions on eating with higher castes, as well as imposed forms of abasement such as only being allowed to wear iron bracelets and being expected to walk barefoot when passing by a landowner or his property. Rashmi’s work as a midwife also reflected the widely-held assumption that Untouchables were receptacles for pollution. Rashmi would attend the mother and baby for a period of twelve days immediately following the delivery when the mother and child would be secluded from the main household. Rashmi would massage both mother and child and clean their faeces by hand. This was work only an Untouchable could do, given the high degree of pollution associated with birth. These understandings of relative purity also shaped

---

<sup>19</sup> This was a pervasive criticism among Catholics in Rashmi’s village, see Schmalz (2005), cited in note 1.

religious life. Before her conversion, Rashmi worshipped the local deity Dih Baba who was propitiated by blood sacrifice as befitting his lower status relative to other deities who were given purer offerings of fruit and milk. Untouchables performed their own wedding ceremonies but did have contact with higher castes through their practice of exorcism (*ojaiti*) since Untouchables were thought to have greater power over the malevolent forces that beset village life.

Rashmi was always quick to point out the contradictions in this system of separation and segregation. Landowners had long taken Untouchable mistresses. But interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, Untouchable women would often serve surreptitiously as wet-nurses for high caste children when the children's mothers were not producing enough milk. Clearly, Rashmi would wryly add, Untouchables were "touchable" when the landowners thought it advantageous.

The discussion about caste continued elliptically through two stories that Rashmi juxtaposed. The first was the tale of the origins of caste that she was told in her childhood. A wealthy Brahmin family in Banaras wished to perform a cow sacrifice according to ancient rites. The sacrifice was dutifully performed in Banaras by a series of Brahmin priests. But after the sacrifice, the Brahmin priests were cursed. The Brahmin who brought the kindling became an Ahir, a livestock herder; the Brahmin who lit the fire became the Dom, a cremation ground worker; and the Brahmin who said the mantras became a Chamar, a tanner.<sup>20</sup> The second story was Rashmi's gloss on the Genesis narrative. Under the influence of the serpent, Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree. God then sat them both down and explained that since they had disobeyed Him, they would be expelled and would have to labour, on the land and in childbirth.

Mythological narratives like these might seem far removed from the philosophical enquiry so lauded in *Fides et Ratio*. But by placing these two narratives together, Rashmi was intending to make a point about not only about caste, but about what we might call "culture." The tale about the Brahmin priests cursed to become low caste is essentially about inter-communal enmity and division. In one sense, the story is making a claim that Chamars were unjustly, or arbitrarily, relegated to their lowly status. It is thus part of a narrative of resistance that unmask the origins of cultural creations that are presented as primordial and beyond questioning. By contrast, Rashmi's re-telling

---

<sup>20</sup> This is a variation of a common story about Untouchable origins--usually the tale concerns two brothers, not Brahmin priests. See Robert Deliège, "Myths of Origin of the Indian Untouchables," *Man* (N.S.) 28 (1993) 533-549.

of the Genesis narrative does not rely upon divisions between social groups; it understands the human fall into sin as the result of the failure of the extended family. Humans thus are not hierarchically separated from each other, but share equally in their responsibility for turning away from God.

When it came to the specific issue of caste, Rashmi remarked, “Work (*kam*) is work (*kam*).” Labouring, as her interpretation of Genesis makes clear, is part of the human condition; it makes no sense to value one particular form of work over another. Extending this point, it seemed to me that Rashmi was saying, or would say, that what is often called “culture” is the collective product of various forms human labour. Extending this point to meet a fundamental observation of *Fides et Ratio*, we might follow Rashmi’s initiative and say that it is through this labour that “cultures share the dynamics which the human experience of life reveals.”<sup>21</sup> But the issue for Rashmi, as well as for many other Catholics in her village, is within this human experience, “who is labouring for whom?” For example, while Advaita Vendanta and Shaiva Siddhanta are doubtless part of India’s rich heritage, Rashmi would never be invited as an interlocutor for a consideration of their potential relationship to Christianity. As someone who had to labour with her hands, Rashmi and her community produced a very different kind of culture in the friction with the often hard edges of their lives as they were lived. Those not familiar with that particular kind of labour might find that they must accustom themselves to a different form of intellectual labour in order to develop new sensitivities and conceptual categories. While John Paul II wishes to affirm “the duty to go beyond the particular and concrete,” Rashmi’s seemingly simple gloss on Genesis shows that the “particular and concrete” can encapsulate quite serious and reflective efforts to engage fundamental philosophical questions about the meaning of being human.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Theology

Schmalz: What do think of the word “Dalit?” [in Hindi]

Rashmi: Huhn?

Prabhunath: Ma, it’s a word that some Chamars and Christians (*Isai*) are beginning to say now to mean “put down”—don’t you know, to talk about how we’re treated by the high castes (*bade log*), how we’ve been made to endure all this trouble (*perishani*). [in Bhojpuri]

---

<sup>21</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, art. 71, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 69, p. 88.

Rashmi: Isn't everyone Dalit? [in Bhojpuri]

Prabhunath: Brother, are you getting this? [in Hindi]

Schmalz: I'm not sure, let's move on [in Hindi]

As he begins his conclusion to *Fides et Ratio*, John Paul II writes, "theology has always had to respond in different historical moments to the demands of different cultures."<sup>23</sup> Emerging theological reflection on the experience of Indian Untouchables has most often probed its political dimensions.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach would not be inconsistent with *Fides et Ratio* since its call for a constructive engagement with culture presumes a Christian political philosophy.<sup>25</sup> But what was striking about Rashmi's reflections was that she resolutely eschewed anti-Brahmin positioning or political assertions of Untouchable identity.<sup>26</sup> A theology inspired by Rashmi's reflections and experiences would not be a political theology of liberation.

Within a Catholic context, theology and philosophy mean something quite specific. The intriguing part of *Fides et Ratio* is that it provides a framework for understanding the specificity of human life as pregnant with theological and philosophical possibility. John Paul II's criticism of historicism was not meant to deny the importance of historical context. Instead, it was intended to affirm that any genuine human enquiry is not inevitably locked in a "hall of mirrors" that simply reflects back upon itself.<sup>27</sup> A theology informed by Rashmi's experience would be a Christocentric theology of embodiment that emphasizes human interrelationships built and sustained through

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., art. 92, p. 113.

<sup>24</sup> For representative works from the Protestant tradition, see Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, n.d.; James Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994. From the Catholic tradition, see George Soares Prabhu, S. J., *The Dharma of Jesus*, ed. Francis Xavier D'Sa, S. J., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> For reflections on the political implications of *Fides et Ratio*, see J. Brian Benestad, "Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Historicism in Pope John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*," in *Gladly to Learn and Gladly to Teach: Essays on Political Philosophy in Honor of Ernest L. Fortin, A. A.*, eds. Michael P. Foley and Douglas Kries, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2002, 53-68.

<sup>26</sup> In her apolitical approach Rashmi was definitely in the minority. On Christian Dalit political activism in her area, see Mathew N. Schmalz, "Veronica's Candidacy," *Dalit International Newsletter* 9 (June 2005) 6-9; see also Mathew N. Schmalz, "The Broken Mirror: John Masih's Journey from Isai to Dalit," *On the Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, eds. Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010, 185-210.

<sup>27</sup> This is an image favored by Benedict XVI in his commentary on *Fides et Ratio*, see Benedict XVI (2007), 368 (cited in note 8).

shared labour. Such a theology would be attentive to the power of narrative not just as a way of bringing meaning into specific life contexts but as a powerful means to articulate broader claims about the nature of being Christian and a human being.

Rashmi's faith does possess rationality. But the connection between her personal faith and a broader rationality sometimes only becomes clear when her reflections are re-contextualized and re-presented. This raises difficult ethical questions about who has the authority to speak about, let alone interpret, the experiences of Untouchables like Rashmi. In response to issues of power and their impact on intellectual reflection, *Fides et Ratio* argues that "dialogue and sincere friendship" allow us to move beyond "a climate of distrust that can beset speculative research."<sup>28</sup> While Rashmi would certainly agree with those sentiments, she would perhaps push the issue further. I remember asking her what she thought about the term "Dalit," meaning "oppressed" or "crushed." After Prabhunath made an effort to explain what I meant, Rashmi simply said, "Isn't everyone 'Dalit'?"<sup>29</sup> The conversation moved no further and for over a decade I have been puzzling over whether I should read anything into her remarks other than frustration with my line of questioning. Regardless of what she actually meant, I do not think she would minimize the specific forms of oppression that she and her community have suffered. Nor do I think that she would she make the claim that a Westerner like myself could somehow imaginatively connect with her experiences in all their particularity. Instead, what she might have meant was that we, as human beings, all experience limitation. Following *Fides et Ratio*, I might also add that in our efforts to transcend those limitations, whether through abstract construals of philosophy or in the effort to build community, we discover the universal human longing for God. In this sense, we could conclude by saying that appreciating the faith and rationality of Christian Dalits like Rashmi is an important act of self-transcendence for Catholic theology and philosophical enquiry.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, art. 24, p. 38.

<sup>29</sup> At that time, the term Dalit was not widely used among Untouchables in Rashmi's area. Now, of course, it is widely used as a specific marker of identity and political engagement.