

**M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the
Emergence of Dalit Theology**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis constitutes my personal research conducted at the University of Edinburgh and United Theological College, Bangalore. All sources used in the thesis are cited in accordance with University of Edinburgh guidelines.

Adrian Bird,
February, 2008

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Thesis Abstract

Dalit Christian Theology emerged as a counter theological movement in India in the 1980s. As a theology *'of the Dalits, by the Dalits, for the Dalits'*, Dalit Christian theology sought to counter prevalent trends in Indian Christian theology which had proved inadequate to reflect the actual experience of the majority of Christians in India. The emergence of Dalit Christian theology as a contextual liberation theology thus reflects a polarising shift in theological discourse within India.

This thesis argues, however, that the theology of M.M. Thomas, a leading non-Dalit Indian Christian theologian of the twentieth Century, offered significant theological signposts for the emergence and development of Dalit Christian theology. While it is clear that he did not, nor could not, construct a Dalit theology, this thesis argues that Thomas's theological reflections in the midst of a rapidly changing and pluralistic religio-secular Indian context brought to the fore of theological debate essential questions relating to the concept of salvation, humanisation and justice relevant to the emergence of Dalit Christian theology. Seeking to relate Christology to the Indian context dynamically, M.M. Thomas sought a theology which could be 'challengingly relevant' to the people of India in the post-Independent search for a just and equal society.

In order to substantiate the thesis, this study examines the reflections of two first generation Dalit Christian theologians, Bishop M. Azariah and Bishop V. Devasahayam. From within a framework of methodological exclusivism, both theologians appear to reject the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas, regarding him an Indian Christian theologian with little relevance to the Dalit theological quest. Closer textual examination, however, reveals that the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas is discernable within emerging Dalit theological discourse.

This thesis further investigates the relevance of M.M. Thomas's theological contribution for Dalit Christian theology today through the critical assessment of twelve second generation Dalit theologians studying at United Theological College, Bangalore. These voices assess the rise of Dalit Christian theology, and examine the relevance of Thomas's thoughts for contemporary Dalit discourse.

Contents

| | Pg. |
|---|-----|
| Introduction | |
| 1.1. Indian Christian Theology..... | 1 |
| 1.2. Dalit Theology..... | 4 |
| 1.3. Methodological Exclusivism..... | 7 |
| 1.4. M.M. Thomas: Quest for a ‘living theology’ | 10 |
| 1.5. Thesis Core..... | 14 |
| 1.6. Definition of Terms..... | 16 |
| 1.7. Previous Research..... | 18 |
| 1.8. Research Questions..... | 20 |
| 1.9. Methodology..... | 21 |
| 1.10 Outline of Chapters..... | 23 |

Chapter I: Dalit Identity and the Emergence of Dalit Theology

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 25 |
| 2. Dalit Identity..... | 25 |
| 2.1. The Religio-Philosophical roots of the Caste System..... | 26 |
| 2.2. Purity-Pollution..... | 29 |
| 3. Caste-Class-Power Nexus..... | 31 |
| 3.1. Class..... | 32 |
| 3.2. Power..... | 34 |
| 3.3. The Changing Context of Independent India..... | 39 |
| 4. Dalit Identity Consciousness..... | 42 |
| 4.1. Dalit Christian Identity..... | 45 |
| 5. Dalit Christology..... | 50 |
| 5.1. The Incarnation of Christ..... | 52 |
| 5.2. Sin..... | 54 |
| 5.3. The Paradigm of the Cross..... | 56 |
| 5.4. Resurrection..... | 58 |
| 6. Conclusion..... | 59 |

Chapter II: The Theology of M.M. Thomas

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1. Introduction..... | 61 |
| 2. M.M. Thomas..... | 61 |
| 2.1. M.M. Thomas's Theology: A <i>karma mārga</i> ?..... | 63 |
| 2.2. Theology of M.M. Thomas | 67 |
| 2.3. Loving Fellowship with God | 69 |
| 2.4. Human Fellowship | 70 |
| 2.5. Human Creativity | 71 |
| 2.6. Individual Sin | 72 |
| 2.7. Corporate Sin | 76 |
| 2.8. God acts in History | 79 |
| 2.9. Human Community, Law and Justice | 80 |
| 3. The Christology of M.M. Thomas | 83 |
| 3.1. The Incarnation of Christ | 83 |
| 3.2. The Cross of Christ | 86 |
| 3.2.1. The Cross as Love | 86 |
| 3.2.2. Victory over Principalities and Powers | 87 |
| 3.2.3. The Cross and Human Community | 88 |
| 3.3. The resurrection of Christ | 90 |
| 3.4. Forgiveness | 92 |
| 3.5. New Humanity in Christ | 93 |
| 3.6. Consummation of the Kingdom | 95 |
| 3.7. Solidarity with the Oppressed | 97 |
| 4. Conclusion | 100 |

Chapter III: Critical Dialogue: M.M. Thomas and Bishop M. Azariah

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1. Introduction | 102 |
| 2. The Tension of Ambiguity | 102 |
| 3. The Methodology of M. Azariah | 103 |
| 4. 'Rejecting' M.M. Thomas | 106 |
| 4.1. M.M. Thomas: A Syrian Caste Christian | 106 |
| 4.2. M.M. Thomas: A Brahminical Theologian? | 113 |
| 5. The Theological Influence of M.M. Thomas | 115 |
| 5.1. Humanisation, Liberation and Conscientisation | 115 |
| 5.2. Caste | 119 |
| 5.2.1. Human Individuality and Community | 121 |
| 5.2.1.1. Individuality | 123 |
| 5.2.1.2. Community Liberation | 125 |
| 5.3. Class | 127 |
| 5.3.1. Gospel for the Poor | 130 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 5.3.2. Social Analysis and Responsible Action | 133 |
| 5.3.3. Charity and Justice | 136 |
| 5.4 Power | 138 |
| 5.4.1. Wounded Psyche | 139 |
| 5.4.2. M.M. Thomas's reflections on Power | 140 |
| 6. Conclusion | 143 |

Chapter IV: Critical Dialogue: M.M. Thomas and Bishop V. Devasahayam

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Introduction | 145 |
| 2. The Methodology of V. Devasahayam | 146 |
| 2.1. Caste – the Original Sin | 146 |
| 2.2 A Tale of Two Theologies | 151 |
| 3. The Theology of Thomas and Devasahayam | 155 |
| 3.1. Theology and Humanisation | 155 |
| 3.1.1. Anthropology | 156 |
| 3.1.2. Human Freedom | 157 |
| 3.1.3. Human Dignity | 160 |
| 3.2 Theology and Justice | 163 |
| 3.2.1. Justice within relationship | 165 |
| 3.2.2. Individual and corporate morality and responsibility | 166 |
| 3.2.3. Liberating justice as a creative human vocation | 168 |
| 3.2.4. Christian hope and the liberating power of the Cross and Resurrection | 173 |
| 3.2.5. Contextual discernment and biblical hermeneutics | 179 |
| 3.2.6. Theological reflections on justice in the public square | 182 |
| 4. Conclusion | 185 |

Chapter V: New Humanity in Christ

| | |
|--|-----|
| 1. Introduction | 187 |
| 2. Global ecumenical discourse and Indian theology | 188 |
| 2.1. The Awakening of the Oppressed | 189 |
| 2.1.1. Scheduled Caste Influence | 191 |
| 2.2. Church-Kingdom debate | 192 |
| 2.3. Theology in the midst of religio-secular diversity | 197 |
| 2.4. Christ-centred <i>Koinonia</i> | 202 |
| 3. The significance of Thomas's thought for Dalit theology | 204 |
| 3.1. New Humanity in Christ: Bishop Devasahayam | 204 |
| 3.2. New Humanity in Christ: Bishop M. Azariah | 210 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 3.2.1. Renewal of Inner Being | 212 |
| 3.2.2. Renewal of Human Relations | 213 |
| 3.3.3. Renewal of the World | 215 |
| 4. Theological Differences | 219 |
| 4.1. Exclusive theology | 219 |
| 4.1.1. God's Direct Option for Dalits | 220 |
| 4.1.2. Dalits: The Sinned-Against | 222 |
| 5. Conclusion | 227 |

Chapter VI: Critical Reflections of Second Generation Dalit Theologians

| | |
|---|-----|
| 1. Introduction | 229 |
| 2. Student Reflections | 230 |
| 2.1. Methodology | 230 |
| 2.2. Reflections on M.M. Thomas's Sermons | 231 |
| 2.2.1. The New Creation in Christ | 231 |
| 2.2.2. The Cross and the Kingdom of God | 235 |
| 2.2.3. The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History | 240 |
| 2.3. Humanisation | 242 |
| 2.4. Sinned-Against | 245 |
| 3. Reflections from Personal Interviews | 252 |
| 3.1 Exclusivity | 252 |
| 3.2 Identity | 254 |
| 3.2.1. Dalit division | 254 |
| 3.2.2. Dalit Christian identity | 255 |
| 3.2.3. M.M. Thomas and Dalit Christian identity | 260 |
| 3.2.4. Christ and Dalit identity | 262 |
| 3.3 Forgiveness | 265 |
| 3.3.1. Forgiveness, Power and Dignity | 266 |
| 3.3.2. Forgiveness, Justice and Transformation | 269 |
| 4. Conclusion | 272 |

Introduction

1. Introduction

This thesis argues that Indian Christian theologian, M.M. Thomas, contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit Christian theology. The controversial nature of this thesis is clear given the fact that Dalit theology emerged in India during the 1980s in “radical discontinuity with the Indian Christian Theology of the Brahminical tradition.”¹ As a non-Dalit Indian Christian thinker, Thomas’s theology was thus considered irrelevant for Dalit theology. Yet it is argued that Dalit theology did not emerge in a theological vacuum, but that significant antecedent contributions paved the way for its emergence. This thesis identifies M.M. Thomas as one such influence critically discernable within first generation Dalit theological writing. The Chapter begins with a brief overview of the Indian Christian theological tradition and the consequent rise of Dalit theology, prior to introducing M.M. Thomas and outlining the thesis statement and methodological approach adopted for this research.

1.1 Indian Christian Theology

The question of Jesus Christ has been one of theological and cultural debate in India throughout the modern era. Certainly Christianity has an oral tradition in India which is traced back to the alleged missionary work of the Apostle Thomas from 52A.D. Indeed, the Syrian Orthodox Christian tradition in India can be traced back to at least the fourth century.² Yet with the increase of

¹ K.P. Kuruvila, “Dalit Theology: An Indian Christian Attempt to Give Voice to the Voiceless”, <http://www.csichurch.com/article/article.htm>. Bishop Devasahayam acknowledges that Dalit theology existed prior to its emergence as a nominal theological movement in the 1980s. Devasahayam references the work of Dalit converts to Christianity, including Yerraguntala Periah and Ditt, who were influential in bringing many Dalits into the Church. See, Shanthi Sudha Monica, “Biographical Musings II – Yerraguntala Periah”, in V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1997, pp. 231-248; James Massey, “Dalit Roots of India Christianity”, in V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers in Dalit Theology*, pp. 183-205

² See, Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 2nd Edition, 1975, pp. 7-11

Western mission activity from the seventeenth century Christianity became all too easily identified as a “foreign religion imported from the West”, criticized for failing to find an Indian voice independent of Western influence.³ Sebastian Kappen observes: “Indian Christianity has, largely, retained its imported character. The Christ of theology and popular devotion still bears the marks of his origin in the West...Small wonder that neither the Christ of the Church nor the Church of Christ has made any profound impact on the Indian People.”⁴ Despite concerted attempts from notable missionary figures, including Robert de Nobili,⁵ Father Pierre Johanns⁶ and Swami Abishaktananda,⁷ who sought to relate the Christian message through the ancient Vedic text and *Vedānta*, Christianity struggled to breach its perceived Western association.

The concern over the foreign nature of Christ and Christianity was raised by Keshab Chandra Sen in a lecture entitled *India Asks-Who is Christ*, 1879. As leader of the Indian theistic movement *Brāhmo Samāj*, founded by Rammohun Roy in 1828, Sen did not identify himself as a Christian but was deeply influenced by Jesus Christ.⁸ After acknowledging his gratitude to the Christian missionaries, for “they have brought unto us Christ”, Sen noted India’s disappointment that the Christ the missionaries brought was a ‘Western Christ.’⁹ The image of a foreign Christianity subverting Hindu society would, he believed, only hinder the progress of the true spirituality of Christianity.¹⁰ Rather than bowing to a ‘foreign prophet’, Sen urged India to look to the ‘rising sun in the East’ in order to “see Christ in the plenitude of his glory and in the fullness and

³ Bede Griffiths, *Christ in India*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993, p. 54

⁴ Sebastian Kappen, quoted in, K.P Kuruvila, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, p. 4

⁵ Robert de Nobili, 17th Century Italian Missionary, was a pioneer in ‘adaptation’, seeking to relate the Christian message to Brahman Hindus through the Vedic texts. See Wayne Teasdale, *Bede Griffiths: An Introduction to His Interspiritual Thought*, Woodstock: Skylight Paths Publishing, 2003, pp. 21-24

⁶ Father Pierre Johanns, Jesuit priest and author of *To Christ Through the Vedānta*, sought to rebuild the Catholic philosophical system of St. Thomas on Indian grounds by harmonizing the different schools of Vedāntic thought. See, K.P. Aleaz, *Christian Thought through the Vedānta*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996; Sean Doyle, *Synthesizing the Vedānta: the Theology of Pierre Johanns*, Doctoral Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2005

⁷ Swami Abishaktananda sought to relate the concept of Christian Trinity to the Hindu concept of *Saccidānanda*, or ‘Being, Consciousness and Bliss.’ See Swami Abishaktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: The Cave of the Heart*, trans. Sara Grant, Bombay: The Institute of Indian Culture, 1969

⁸ Keshab Chandra Sen, *India Asks-Who is Christ?* Calcutta: The Indian Mirror Press, 1879

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

freshness of his divine life.”¹¹ In the West, Christ had been formulated into “lifeless dogmas and antiquated symbols”, but the true Christ, for Sen, was Asiatic, devoid of western appendages.¹² When Sen described Jesus as ‘our Jesus’, he did not deny Christ to the West, but rather claimed the right for India to know Jesus without the attachment of Western doctrine.¹³

Thus began the quest to inculturate Christianity into the soil of India.¹⁴ A range of Indian Christian voices sought to develop a distinctive Indian theology which would make use of the “remarkably rich diversity of forms and modes of thought, related...to the main philosophical schools of the surrounding culture.”¹⁵ What emerged was a new trend in theological endeavour, with Indian theologians, many of whom were high caste converts from Hinduism, attempting to translate the Christian message through the Hindu *Vedāntic* tradition. The diversity in theological reflection of Christianity through the *Vedāntic* tradition, including significant contributions from Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy (1861-1907),¹⁶ Vengal Chakkarai (1880-1958), Pandipeddi Chenchiah (1886-1959), and Bishop A.J. Appassamy (1891-1975),¹⁷ make it evident that there were many Indian Christian *theologies* emerging in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁸ Indeed, Rev. Dr. O.V. Jathanna argues that while members of the Madras Rethinking Christianity group were held together by a common vision to relate the Christian message in the Indian context, there was “ample scope for freedom of thought and expression. It is an example of unity in diversity in theological

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

¹² *Ibid.* The concept of the Asiatic Christ is taken up further by P.C. Mozoomdar in, *The Oriental Christ*. Boston: Geo. H. Ellis, 1883. Indian spiritual influence in the life of Jesus is also addressed by S. Radhakrishnan in, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939, ch. 5

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ K.C. Abraham. *Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives in Missio*, Tiruvalla: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1996, p. 15.

¹⁵ Robin Boyd, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3

¹⁶ Julius J. Lipner, *Brahmabandhab Upadhyay: The Life and Thought of a Revolutionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999; Timothy Tennent, *Building Christianity on Indian Foundations: The Theological Legacy of Brahmabāndhab Upādhyāy*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000

¹⁷ Pandipeddi Chenchiah, *Rethinking Christianity in India*. Madras: A.N. Sudarisanam, 1938; Vengal Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought*, Madras: CLS, 1932.

¹⁸ For a discussion on the diverse theological contributions of the Madras Rethinking Group, see O.V. Jathanna, “The Madras Rethinking Group and its Contributions to the Development of Indian Christian Theology”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 3, September, 1997, pp. 74-98

thinking.”¹⁹ While there is methodological necessity in locating theologians in broad categorical terms, there is a danger that these categories become rigidly defined, failing to reflect the diversity of thought.

1.2. Dalit Theology

Dalit theology has been labelled a ‘counter theology’, challenging prevalent trends in Indian Christian theology and opposing all elements of Hindu tradition which had historically denied Dalit humanity.²⁰ Dalit theology thus emerged as a counter-theological movement, seeking to construct an ‘authentically Indian Liberation theology’ on behalf of the Dalits.²¹

The charge made by first generation Dalit theologians was that a ‘theological hegemony’ had been created by caste Indian theologians seeking to relate Christianity through religio-philosophical paradigms of Hinduism, thus reinforcing the status quo of life in India subject to the religio-social construct of caste:

The cultural and religious traditions of one dominant group of Christians were gradually elevated to serve as the framework within which to do Christian theology...from the caste communities’ point of view, they were given an opportunity to configure a normative master-narrative that combined together the heritage of their Hindu ancestors and the Christian story.²²

Dalit theologians claimed that theological attempts to relate Christianity to India through Hindu *Advaitic* and *Vedāntic* systems had done little more than accentuate the marginalized experience of the Dalits.²³ Indian Christian theology, Arvind P. Nirmal argued, had been developed on behalf of the minority of elite caste Christians ‘obsessed’ with the Brahminic tradition,²⁴ thus excluding the voice of the Dalits who make up an estimated 75% of the 20 million Christian

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92. For a constructive account of the diversity in theological deliberation among Indian Christian theologians, see Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002

²⁰ Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology”, Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1990, p. 144

²¹ M.E. Prabhakar “The Search for a Dalit Theology”, in James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, p. 213

²² Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 42

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 27

²⁴ Arvind P. Nirmal, *op. cit.*, p.141

population in India.²⁵ Dalit theologians argued that cosmological and metaphysical reflection offered little justice to the socio-political and economic plight of Dalits, those defined by the caste system as ‘outcaste’ and ‘untouchable’.²⁶

The emergence of Dalit theology thus represents a dramatic shift in theological discourse within the Indian context, described by Nirmal as a shift from ‘propositions to people’:

In the past we understood theological truths as a series of propositions which had to be logical, consistent, coherent and ‘systematic’. In liberation theologies, however, we moved away from the propositional character of classical theologies and became more concerned with people in their life-life with all its absurdity, illogicality, inconsistency, incoherence and unsystematicness.²⁷

Here Nirmal is critical of Western patterns of theology, as well as of Indian Christian theology which sought to translate theological propositions through the philosophical streams of the Hindu tradition. Nirmal criticised confessional theological claims that fixed doctrinal formulation of the Gospel simply had to be ‘interpreted’ or ‘translated’ into the Indian context, believing that the task of theology is to ‘re-search’ all doctrinal formulations in the context of contemporary reality.²⁸ He argued:

We should speak not only in terms of the new Gospel but also in terms of the newness of the Gospel. The Gospel becomes and happens. It did not just happen once upon a time. It is these new Gospel-happenings that need to be theologized. Theological formulations of these new Gospel happenings should critically examine the older formulations and if necessary, discard them.²⁹

²⁵ Lancy Lobo, “Dalit Religious Movements and Dalit Identity”, in Walter Fernandes ed. *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The Re-Assertion of the Subalterns*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996, p. 170

²⁶ Sathianathan Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 33

²⁷ Arvind Nirmal, “Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective”, in Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, p. 140

²⁸ Arvind Nirmal, “Theological Research: Its Implications for the Nature and Scope of the Theological Task in India”, *Heuristic Explorations*, p. 25

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The Gospel is not, therefore, a once for all occurrence. There is a 'newness' to the Gospel, with God dynamically present in the struggles, aspirations and hopes of the people.³⁰

K.C. Abraham argues: "Theology is not a systematic explication of timeless truths nor is it a matter of laying a pre-fabricated system of ideas to a situation. It is a reflection on the articulation of the faith experience of people in a given context."³¹ The heuristic tools for this articulation of faith are the empirical realities of the people, using metaphors, language, values, and experiences as the datum for theologising.³² As a theology from 'below', Dalit theology endeavours to be relevant for the Dalit people based on the reality of their daily existence, concerned with empowering the people in their struggle for liberation from human indignity, inequality and oppression.³³

The quest to inculturate the Christian message through the theological lens of the Hindu tradition was natural for Indian theologians familiar with aspects of that tradition. Dalits, however, sought to theologise not through the lens of the Hindu tradition, but rather through their experience of suffering as 'outcastes'. Dalit Christians were concerned with questions emerging from their degraded status in society, such as "how to earn their daily bread, how to overcome their life situation of oppression, poverty, suffering, injustice, illiteracy, and denial of identity."³⁴ The experience of suffering, Nirmal argues, marks a significant epistemological shift in the Dalit approach to theology. While affirming praxis as a basis for knowledge, Nirmal notes that *pathos* is the epistemological starting point for Dalits, prior to any theory or praxis related to the struggle for liberation.³⁵ It is through such pathos that the sufferer comes to

³⁰ Franklyn J. Balasundaram, "The Contribution of A.P. Nirmal to Theology and Especially to Dalit Theology", *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, 1998, p. 87

³¹ K.C. Abraham, "Third World Theology: Paradigm Shift and Emerging Concerns", M.P. Joseph, ed. *Confronting Life: Theology out of Context*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1995, p. 207

³² Franklyn J. Balasundaram, *op. cit.*, p. 85

³³ Arvind Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 140

³⁴ James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, p. 153

³⁵ Arvind P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective", Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, p. 141; For a discussion on the epistemological break in theology, see, Per Frostin, "The Hermeneutics of the Poor – The Epistemological 'Break' in Third World Theologies", *Studia Theologica*, Vol. 39, 1985, pp. 127-150

know God and to know that God participates in human pain, as characterized by the passion of Jesus and his crucifixion.³⁶

Dalit theological questions would essentially relate to who Christ was in the midst of their struggle for human equality, dignity, and liberation from socio-economic oppression. In other words, Dalits were keen to know whether the redemptive message of Christ had any significance for them in the worldly realm. Liberation thus became a central paradigm for Dalit theologians, raising essential issues of socio-economic justice into the heart of theological reflection and praxis. K.C. Abraham writes: “The primary objective of theological reflection...is to help people in their struggle for justice and freedom. It is not enough to understand and interpret God’s act, that is, to give reason for their faith, but also to help change their situation in accordance with the utopia of the vision of the gospel.”³⁷

1.3. Methodological Exclusivism

During his pioneering speech at United Theological College, Bangalore 1981, Arvind Nirmal called upon Dalits to shun their ‘theological passivity’ in order to confront previous Indian theologies that had failed to bring the liberation motif into the theological realm.³⁸ In order to protect Dalit theology from being submerged by hegemonic theologies from outside, Nirmal demanded a ‘methodological exclusivism’ be adopted by Dalit theologians:

This exclusivism is necessary because the tendency of all dominant traditions – cultural or theological – is to accommodate, include, assimilate and finally conquer others. Counter theologies or people’s theologies therefore, need to be on their guard and need to shut off the influences of the dominant theological tradition.³⁹

Thus the Dalit Christian theological movement was born, a theology “of the Dalits, by the Dalits, for the Dalits.”⁴⁰ The Dalit voice needed adequate

³⁶ A. P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 141

³⁷ K.C. Abraham, “Third World Theology: Paradigm Shift and Emerging Concerns”, M.P. Joseph, ed. *Confronting Life; Theology out of Context*, pp. 207-8

³⁸ Sathianathan Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 45

³⁹ Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations*, p. 144

⁴⁰ M.E. Prabhakar, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 210

theological space in order to effectively articulate the daily realities of pain-pathos experience.⁴¹ This methodological approach has been prevalent among first generation Dalit theologians, including Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam. It is a methodology which essentially polarises Dalit theology from Indian Christian theology in order to construct a counter theological movement specifically related to the concerns of Dalits.

Over the last twenty five years Dalit theology has become a significant theological trend within the Indian context. Yet there have also been concerns that a methodological exclusivism leads to a position of theological isolation. K.P. Kuruvila quotes African American theologian, James Cone, reflecting on his own experience of Black Theology:

Any time a theology only speaks to its own racial or historical or class oriented group – only to its people, then it gets locked down in its own concerns and thus becomes much more open to ideology rather than to theology. The way that you move out of that ideological determination is always to engage and know that you speak to people beyond particularity to learn from them and also teach them.⁴²

Dyanchand Carr refutes the criticism that methodological exclusivism leads to theological exclusivity which creates divisions and polarisations within the Christian community.⁴³ Carr argues:

Christians bound by traditional attitudes and those Christians who stand to benefit by those attitudes, are voicing a false concern. They warn us that Dalit Theology will endanger the unity of the church, that it will foster division and polarisation. They refuse to recognise that through their supposed concern to preserve a non-existing Christian unity they advocate the worship of a god who endorses domination.⁴⁴

Carr makes a significant observation. Dalit theology emerged to challenge the exclusivity already prevalent within Indian Christian theology. The argument that Dalit theology may disrupt a ‘non-existing Christian unity’ is thus critically challenged. Yet despite Carr’s observation, the caution against methodological exclusivism must not be dismissed so easily. Stanley Samartha, while

⁴¹ Arvind. P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 142

⁴² K.P. Kuruvila, *op. cit.*, p. 197-8

⁴³ Dyanchand Carr, “A Biblical Basis for Dalit Theology”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalits: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 231

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 235

acknowledging the need for Christologies that respond to the needs of India, writes:

There is not much point in seeking to free ourselves from bondage to the West only to be bound to Asian or African or Latin American Christologies. For Indian Christian theologians, for example, to reject violently 'Brahmanical Christology' only to be enmeshed in 'Dalit Christology' or 'People's Theology' or 'Liberation Theology' ...is to exchange one bondage for another.⁴⁵

In this thesis the methodology of first generation theologians will be critically examined. It is argued that while such a methodology strengthens Dalit theology in political and strategic terms, it raises critical *theological* concerns, as expressed by second generation Dalit theologians.

It is important to note that A.P. Nirmal did not interpret methodological exclusivism to mean theological exclusivism. Nirmal notes that Indian Christian theology should not be looked upon as a "separatist movement which has completely cut itself off from the rest of the theological world", but rather be viewed as "continuous with and in dialogue with other theologies in the Christian world."⁴⁶ Consistent with his own theological methodology which sought to 're-search' theology in light of the contemporary context, Nirmal advocates theological exploration in order to enrich the character of Christian theology as a whole.⁴⁷ A position of methodological exclusivism which encourages and nurtures the Dalit theological voice does not therefore preclude theological reflections developed outside the Dalit community. In this light I agree with James Massey, who suggests that Dalit theology is to be viewed not in absolute terms as a counter theology, but rather as a theological expression written by Dalits who are subjects of their own history.⁴⁸ Massey suggests that other theologies, including traditional Indian Christian theology, were not intentionally formulated to deal with the Dalit experience and therefore offer theology from a different contextual reality. Thus he argues that Dalit theology cannot rightly be

⁴⁵ S.J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*. New York: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 94

⁴⁶ Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations*, p. 26

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, pp. 76-78

called a counter theology but rather a contextual theology.⁴⁹ By understanding Dalit theology as a contextual theology, or more precisely as a range of diverse Christian *theologies* within the Dalit population, the door is open for diverse theological reflection within the wider realm of theological discourse in India. This is a significant point for this research, allowing for a critical engagement between Dalit theologians and the theology of M.M. Thomas. Such a critical dialogical relationship does not seek to discount points of tension and essential countering of traditionally held perspectives, but rather seeks to enrich theological creativity and perspective in light of the dynamic nature of theological enquiry within a given context.

1.4. M.M. Thomas: Quest for a ‘living theology’

Following an evangelical experience as a student in Trivandrum, Kerala (1931-2), M.M. Thomas became a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.⁵⁰ Through the Mar Thoma Youth Union and the Student Christian Movement Thomas became involved in evangelical and social service activities among students and neighbourhood villagers of different faith.⁵¹ Participating in evangelistic activities with the Mar Thoma Church in North Travancore, he experienced a “slow awakening to the social implications of the Gospel.”⁵² Indeed, Thomas later rebuked himself for participating in these evangelistic tours, which “made Christianity a ‘duping drug’ by preaching only the salvation of souls without touching the pitiable living conditions” of the people they encountered.⁵³ Thus began a journey in which Thomas would struggle to come to grips with faith in the midst of the rapidly changing Indian context.⁵⁴

This was a significant shift in Thomas’s theological journey, prompting new questions of the relation between theology, anthropology and ideology in the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ This was an experience of Christ as the ‘bearer of Divine forgiveness’. See, M.M. Thomas, “Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility”, Unpublished autobiographical manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore, 1972, p. 1

⁵¹ T. Jacob Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 29

⁵² M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 5

⁵³ T. Jacob Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 30

⁵⁴ M.M. Thomas, quoted in T. Jacob Thomas, *ibid.*, p. 40

quest to develop a living theology in a rapidly changing Indian context.⁵⁵ Within this search Thomas was concerned primarily with the relation between the gospel of salvation in Christ and the human search for humanity:

The crucial question raised in the theology of mission ... is that of the relation between the gospel of salvation and the struggles of men everywhere for their humanity, constituting as this does the contemporary context of the world in which the gospel has to be communicated. The question, in other words, is that of the relation between Mission and Humanisation.⁵⁶

The revolutionary 'self-awakening' of the poor and the oppressed worldwide for their social liberation and humanity essentially shaped M.M. Thomas's theological enquiry.⁵⁷ This quest for fullness of humanity he considered particularly relevant to the Indian context:

Is this concern for the humanum relevant for the Indian Church? Most certainly, yes. Because the new India is involved in the task of removing the subhuman condition of living of traditional solidarities of religion, caste and class, joint family and village, and of building a new pattern of society and state which will be sensitive to the fundamental rights of man as a human person and to the fundamental demand that any human community should be both just and productive. That is, India is engaged in all spheres of life with the task of humanisation of the structures of collective existence, and with helping every man realize his personhood in society.⁵⁸

The 'human' question Thomas considered a fundamental concern not only for Christianity but for other religions and secular ideologies in the modern era. For Thomas, the common concern for humanisation, as opposed to a common religiosity, provided the most effective basis for spiritually penetrating inter-religious and 'quasi-religious' ideological discourse.⁵⁹ He writes:

It is argued that a meeting of world faiths can never be at the deepest dimensions of spiritual reality, because it takes place on the level of man and his problems, and not on that of his

⁵⁵ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM Press, 1969p. i

⁵⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Madras: CLS, 1971p. 2

⁵⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Open Church", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, pp. 418-419

⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, "The Significance of the Ecumenical Study on the Humanum for the Church in India", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XC, No. 11, November, 1970, pp. 451-452

⁵⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Bangalore: CISRS & Madras: CLS, 1975, p. vi & xi.

God-consciousness...But the fact is that there is an integral relationship between the anthropological and theological concerns which makes it impossible to deal with the structure and direction of the self-transcendence of man without dealing in some form with the transcendent reality of 'God', even if it is only to deny its truth or its relevance.⁶⁰

The renaissance of Hinduism in India and the emergence of secular ideologies in the context of modern India further shaped Thomas's theological quest for a dynamic, living theology relevant to India's quest for a new society built upon the goals of humanisation and justice.⁶¹ Heilke Wolters correctly observes that ideological reflection became an essential component of Thomas's theology, concerned with essential questions of justice and power in modern India.⁶² Indeed, it was precisely within this quest that Thomas believed the Christian message to be relevant, leading him to urge Indian Christians to "involve themselves with others in creating and promoting ideologies which are informed by Christian insights and which can help the people in their struggle for justice, without giving up the transcendence of Faith over any ideology."⁶³

M.M. Thomas's theology sought to take seriously the context in which the *kerygma* of the Gospel could be made more intelligible between the 'cutting edge' of the Word and the world,⁶⁴ between the Gospel of Christ and concrete life situations.⁶⁵ 'Living theology' he considered necessarily situational: "The truth is that theology is always the explication of the truth of the contemporary encounter between the Gospel and the situation. Therefore living theology is always in the situation, and cannot be abstracted from it."⁶⁶ Elsewhere he writes, "living theology is the manner in which a Church confesses its faith and

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xi

⁶¹ M.M. Thomas, "The Open Church", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, pp. 418-9

⁶² Heilke T. Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation: M.M. Thomas's Concept of Salvation and the Collective Struggle for Fuller Humanity in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 10; M.M. Thomas, "Dialogue Among Religions and Ideologies on a Post-Modern Humanism", Andreas Nehring, *Prejudice: Issues in Third World Theologies*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1996, p. 328

⁶³ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, pp. 52-53

⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Clergy and the Laity in the Wholeness of the Church", *Student World*, 4th Quarter, 1950, p. 323

⁶⁵ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 56

⁶⁶ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, p. 298; See also, M.M. Thomas, "Universalism and the Unchanging Core of the Christian Dogma", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, June, 1967

establishes its historical existence in dialogue with its own environment.”⁶⁷ Significantly, this definition is accepted by Dalit theologian James Massey.⁶⁸ Certainly the quest of Dalit theologians has been to understand the Gospel of Christ in direct relation to their specific existential context. Indeed Dalit theology emerged to challenge both the Indian Church and Indian Christian theology which afforded little attention to the injustices and cruelties experienced by the Dalits.⁶⁹

M.M. Thomas saw in the dynamic interaction of theology with anthropology and ideology great creative theological possibility. Theology relates not only to a static conviction of faith, but rather to a faith “seeking rational understanding of the truth and meaning of its commitment.”⁷⁰ This search is ongoing, demanding a willingness to critically examine the contemporary situation so that a “renewed commitment of faith and a correction of its expressions are continually made possible.”⁷¹ Thus theology becomes the servant of the community of faith and allows this community to renew itself in light of the contemporary situation. Thomas recognizes that his position is fraught with danger but also with creative theological possibility, encouraging Christian theology to ‘risk Christ for Christ’s sake’.⁷² Here the position of Thomas resonates with Nirmal’s call to *re-search* past theological formulations in light of the present, allowing Dalit Christians to speak about the ‘newness of the Gospel’ within the contemporary existential context.⁷³

Rev. Dr. Joseph Muthuraj emphasised that in its very essence, Dalit theology is a ‘people’s theology.’⁷⁴ Significantly, Thomas’s living theology refers not primarily to the clergy or theological academics but essentially to the laity, those who live in the midst of the world. While not seeking to undermine the role of the clergy, whom he regards as the servants of Christ to the lay congregants,

⁶⁷ Robin Boyd, *op. cit.*, Foreword.

⁶⁸ James Massey, *Introducing Dalit Theology*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2004, p. 8

⁶⁹ Dr. K. Rajaratnam, “The Indian Christian Church and the Dalit Liberation: A New Agenda for the Church in India”, *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Vol. XI, No. 1&2, 2001, p. 3

⁷⁰ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, p. 289

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 290

⁷² M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 1987

⁷³ Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1990, pp. 25-26

⁷⁴ Rev. Dr. Muthuraj made this comment during an initial presentation of this thesis abstract, UTC, Bangalore, January, 2005.

Thomas observes that “the relevance of the professional ordained ministry is its relevance to the lay vocation.”⁷⁵ Here Thomas emphasises a living theology for the people taking place beyond the walls of the Church amidst the context of every day life in all its diversity. The laity is “called to make decisions in obedience or disobedience to the Word of God dynamically operative in the economic, political and social orders of historical living.”⁷⁶

The seeds of theological resonance between M.M. Thomas and Dalit theologians become quickly apparent. The search for a living theology which encourages the people to participate as subjects of theological reflection and action within the existential realities of the world, and a concern to relate theology to anthropology and ideology in the pursuit of humanisation, liberation and justice, highlights key points of theological resonance which warrant further investigation.

1.5. Thesis Core

M.M. Thomas is classified by Dalit theologians as a caste Indian Christian theologian, and thus irrelevant for Dalit theology. Arvind P. Nirmal labelled Thomas as an exponent of Hindu *karma mār̄ga*,⁷⁷ effectively categorising him as a theological foe rather than ally of Dalit theology. Bishop Azariah describes Thomas as a ‘Brahminical theologian’ who excluded Dalits from his theological reflections on the process of humanisation.⁷⁸ Bishop Devasahayam argues that Indian Christian theologians, including M.M. Thomas, offered little more than ‘demonologies’ for failing to name caste as the original sin in India.⁷⁹

Certainly M.M. Thomas was not Dalit, and thus did not and could not reflect theologically from a Dalit perspective. Neither did he set about to write a theology specifically related to the Dalit context or experience. Indeed Dalit

⁷⁵ M.M. Thomas, “The Clergy and the Laity in the Wholeness of the Church”, in M.M. Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, Madras: CLS, 1978, pp. 23 & 24

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 25

⁷⁷ Arvind Nirmal, ed *Heuristic Explorations*, pp. 139-140. *karma mār̄ga*, or ‘path of action’ within the Hindu tradition. See, Sarvepalli Radakrishnan & Charles A. Moore, Ed. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 143-145.

⁷⁸ Interview, Bishop Azariah, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Chennai, 19th November, 2005.

⁷⁹ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam, CSI Diocesan Office, Chennai, 21st November, 2005.

theology as a named movement emerged in the twilight of Thomas's life. If we accept Nirmal's position that the epistemological starting point for Dalit theological reflection is that of pain-pathos experience, then certainly M.M. Thomas's theology cannot simply be transposed into the Dalit theological context. Certainly the attempt to force, as it were, a square peg into a round hole will prove fruitless.

As noted above, the emergence of Dalit theology in the 1980s marked the beginnings of a diachronic movement which sought to establish an authentic theology of liberation, focussing on key issues of human identity and dignity, justice and humanisation of oppressed Dalits. Despite the call for 'radical discontinuity' with Indian Christian theology, however, this thesis argues that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology.⁸⁰

M.M. Thomas has been described by Dr. Abraham Stephen as an 'Asian liberation theologian', a theologian deeply concerned with the struggles of the suffering Asian people.⁸¹ Indeed, Thomas's attempts to articulate the integral relation between salvation and humanisation demonstrate a deep theological concern for human equality, dignity, justice and the liberation of the oppressed. In the midst of a rapidly changing religio-secular context, Thomas sought to make theology relevant to the vision of a transformed Indian society, concerned with the struggle of the poor and oppressed for justice, dignity, and the power to participate in the decision making structures of India. His interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ within the broader framework of creation-fall-redemption-consummation, allowed Thomas to envision a new Indian society centred on the Cross as the divine forgiveness of sin. The paradigm of New Humanity in Christ would be the foundation for a creative vision of transformed society, transcending divisive communal identity and structures, allowing the people to live in freedom, dignity, and responsibility as persons-in-community. Locating M.M. Thomas as a liberation theologian opposed to caste communalism, class injustice and human indignity, and as a

⁸⁰ The initial stirrings of this thesis were articulated in my work entitled "M.M. Thomas: Theological Signposts for the Emergence of Dalit Theology", in Godwin Shiri, ed. *Contextualisation: A Re-reading of M.M. Thomas*, Bangalore: CSS & CISRS, pp. 42-76

⁸¹ Abraham Stephen, *Christ in the Cultural Context: An Exploration of Dr. M.M. Thomas's Theology of Religions*. Bangalore Theological Forum, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 2004, p. 38

man searching for a dynamic theological foundation adequate to the quest for a full, liberating and just Indian society, it is argued that his theological contribution was significant for the emergence of Dalit theology, and remains relevant for present day Dalit theological discourse.

1.6. Definition of terms

Dalit: Various terms were introduced by the British to categorise the Dalits of India, including the ‘Depressed Classes’ and later ‘Scheduled Castes’, a term which remains definitive for Dalits in determining eligibility for Government reservation benefits through the Constitutional (Scheduled Castes) Order.⁸² Other titles, imposed from within India, include *untouchables*, *harijans*,⁸³ *pañcamas*,⁸⁴ and *avarnas*.⁸⁵ Rejecting these terms, intellectual ‘outcaste’ Indians appropriated the term ‘Dalit’ as an expression of self-identity.⁸⁶ The etymology of the term can be traced to the Sanskrit root *dal*, meaning ‘downtrodden’, ‘crushed’, ‘destroyed’.⁸⁷ Today the term is used by Dalits to assert a common identity with those who have historically suffered under the religious and social norms of India.⁸⁸ Initially coined in the nineteenth century by Marathi social reformer, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, the term Dalit was adopted in the 1970s by the Dalit

⁸² This is particularly significant for Dalit Christians, who are excluded from the Scheduled Caste list. James Massey, “Dalits: Historical Roots”, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, pp. 35-39

⁸³ *Harijan* = “People of God” was the popular term given to the Dalits by Mahatma Gandhi. It was originally used as a term of abuse by Narsi Mehta in the 1920s to describe the offspring of the system of temple prostitution. Within the Hindu *Devadasi* system, notes M.C. Raj: “Since the Dalit children are born out of the sexual act that takes place in the temple and since they do not know to which caste they belong and since they do not have a caste they must be called the children of god, Hari Jan, Harijan.” M.C. & Jyothi Raj, *Dalitology: The Book of The Dalit People*, Tumkur: Ambedkar Resource Centre, 2001

⁸⁴ *pañcamas* = ‘Fifth Caste/Colour’. See Lancy Lobo, “Dalit Religious Movements and Dalit Identity”, in Walter Fernandes ed. *The Emerging Dalit Identity: The Re-Assertion of the Subalterns*, New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1996, p. 167

⁸⁵ *avarnas* = outside the varnas.

⁸⁶ Samuel Jayakumar argues that the term is another ‘imposed identity’ from elite intellectuals, and thus rejected by the poor and oppressed in many parts of the country. See Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1999, p. 15

⁸⁷ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, p. 11

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11

Panther Movement in Maharashtra, and is today widely accepted by Dalit theologians.⁸⁹

The Dalit Freedom Network estimates that there are 250 million Dalits in India today.⁹⁰ Although there is no definitive consensus among Dalit theologians as to who constitutes 'Dalit', invariably the term is used in reference to the Scheduled Castes. Samuel Jayakumar writes:

Though most Dalit liberation theologians restrict their use of the term to Scheduled Castes, a few leaders of the Dalit movement say that the term Dalit is comprehensive and includes all oppressed peoples except the upper-caste Hindus. But the word is not widely used to refer to all the poor and the oppressed. It usually refers to one particular group of castes, the SCs, that is those castes admitted to the special schedule by the government of India.⁹¹

The question of Dalit identity is central to the Dalit theological movement, and thus a source of continued debate. Jayakumar further notes that the disagreement over who is included in the category 'Dalit' leads to inevitable difficulties in bringing all Dalits under 'one umbrella for a united struggle'.⁹² This becomes problematic, as will become apparent in this thesis, when boundaries are marked to include as well as exclude people from the Dalit community.⁹³

Dalit theology: The term 'Dalit theology' is used in this thesis to refer specifically to Dalit Christian theology, in line with common usage among Dalit theologians. While it is misleading to suggest that there is a single Dalit theology, the singular term is used to reflect the Dalit theological quest to maintain a common identity among all Dalits. Discussing Dalit religion, Sathianathan Clarke acknowledges the need to use singular terminology despite the fact that Dalit religion has many context-specific variations.⁹⁴ He notes: "I opt for the singular mainly to reflect the history of solidarity that is emerging

⁸⁹ James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, p. 6.

⁹⁰ See, <http://www.dalitnetwork.org/>. See also, Mary Grey, *The Unheard Scream: The Struggles of Dalit Women in India*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies (Theology), 2004, p. 5

⁹¹ Samuel Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, pp. 12-13

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 14

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Sathianathan Clarke, "Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religions and a Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity", *Religion and Society; Dalit Concerns*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, 2004, *op. cit.*, p. 32

from among Dalit communities. In the end, Dalit scholarship finds strategic rather than essential reasons to project a common identity for the differing strands of Dalit communities in India.”⁹⁵ Opting for the singular to maintain Dalit solidarity thus has a strategic significance in the quest for liberation from ‘dalitness’. Yet the significance is not merely strategic but also theological. In developing a Dalit theology, Dalit Christians seek a theological and Christological paradigm which does not sever but rather embraces unity with Dalits of other religious or secular identity. Dalit identity therefore becomes a key term of reference for theological praxis, reflection and discourse. Aware of this position, Dr. John Mohan Razu proclaims the need for Dalit theologians to move beyond the narrow and exclusive confines of ‘Dalit Christian’ in order to theologise in reference to Dalit commonalities.⁹⁶ The term Dalit theology is used to reflect this concern.

1.7. Previous Research

The theology of M.M. Thomas has generated widespread interest, as evidenced by the array of scholarly publications and theses devoted to Thomas’s thought. The Rev. Dr. T.M. Philip, author of *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, examines Thomas’s theological anthropology and the encounter with secular ideologies emerging in India. This work identifies three major shifts in Thomas’s theology, namely the ‘Liberal Phase’, the ‘Neo-Orthodox’ phase and a ‘Post-Kraemer’ phase, helpful in identifying both the continuity and evolution of Thomas’s thought.⁹⁷ T. Jacob Thomas’s work, *Ethics of a World Community: Contribution of M.M. Thomas*, examines the theological ethics of M.M. Thomas in the context of nascent religious and secular ideological shifts in India. This study investigates the theological concept of *Koinonia*-in-Christ as a basis for Indian society. Heilke T. Wolters offers an extensive chronological study of Thomas’s theology in his book, *Theology of Prophetic Participation: M.M.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ John Mohan Razu, “Dalit Theology”, in James Massey & Fr. S. Lourduwamy, *A Theology from Dalit Perspective*, New Delhi: Centre of Dalit Studies, 2001, p. 36

⁹⁷ T.M. Philip, “The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas”, Madras: CLS, 1986

*Thomas's Concept of Salvation and the Collective Struggle for Fuller Humanity in India.*⁹⁸ These works offer significant insight into M.M. Thomas's theological reflections, providing essential resources for understanding his theology.

Yet Thomas's theology has not been studied in relation to Dalit theology, a movement established to lay theological foundations for the Dalit quest for liberation, equality, dignity and justice in the midst of the caste-class-power nexus of India. K.P. Kuruvila's important doctoral study, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*, provides a theological overview of the concept of Christian 'inculturation' and 'liberation' in India, including the theology of M.M. Thomas and Dalit theology.⁹⁹ Identifying Thomas as a theologian of *karma mārga*, however, emphasises the distinction Kuruvila makes between Thomas and the Dalit theological movement. This study attempts to go further than Kuruvila, arguing that Thomas's theology, while essentially distinct from Dalit theology, contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence and development of Dalit theology. Thus it brings Thomas's theology into critical discourse with first and second generation Dalit theologians in a bid to assess the significance of Thomas's thought within the diachronic movement of Dalit theology.

The writings of M.M. Thomas are both prolific and diverse. In a doctoral thesis relating to the theology of M.M. Thomas presented by Sunand Sumithra, Thomas notes that "Sumithra has attempted an almost impossible job - to systemise an unsystematic body of writings".¹⁰⁰ Recognizing the peril in such a task, it is not my attempt to systematize Thomas's writings, but rather to identify significant theological elements in his work which can be acknowledged as contributing to the emergence of Dalit theology. It is argued that M.M. Thomas's quest for a living theology relevant to the context of the Indian people within their specific life situation provided a new space for theological enquiry, demanding new theological analysis and new questions to be asked within the

⁹⁸ Heilke T. Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation: M.M. Thomas's Concept of Salvation and the Collective Struggle for Fuller Humanity in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996

⁹⁹ Kuruvila, K.P. *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002

¹⁰⁰ Handwritten comments made by M.M. Thomas in the dissertation of Sumithra. Stanley Sumithra, "Theology of Mission in Indian Context; A Study of Madathilaparamil Mammen Thomas", Doctoral Thesis submitted to Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen, 1981. UTC Archives, Bangalore.

caste-class-power nexus of a changing Indian context. Such a shift in theological enquiry paved the way for the oppressed voices to emerge and demand a voice in the theological realm.

It is in the spirit of ‘enriching theological creativity’, noted above, that a study of M.M. Thomas’s significance for emerging Dalit theology is undertaken. While it is clear that M.M. Thomas did not write a theology for Dalits, the theological signposts he laid for the emerging Dalit theology are certainly worthy of investigation.

1.8. Research Questions

The research questions assist in substantiating the thesis that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence and development of Dalit theology. The following questions will be addressed during the course of this research:

- Is a dichotomous methodology, which sets Dalit theology against Indian Christian theology, adequate for locating the theology of M.M. Thomas?
- Liberation from dehumanisation, existential pathos, injustice and indignity are primary theological goals of Dalit theology. How may M.M. Thomas’s theology of New Humanity in Christ, set within the broader paradigm of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation, be considered relevant to the Dalit theological quest?
- Dalit theologians seeks to maintain an essential link between Christian and non-Christian Dalits in the quest for Dalit liberation. How are M.M. Thomas’s reflections of *koinonia*-in-Christ amidst the pluralistic religio-secular context relevant for emerging Dalit theology?
- How do Bisop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam, as first generation Dalit theologians, assess the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas?
- Critically evaluating the diachronic movement of Dalit theology, how do second generation Dalit theologians assess the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas as relevant for Dalit theological discourse today?

1.9. Methodology

The methodology adopted for this thesis incorporates three component phases:

A) The first phase involves a close textual study of M.M. Thomas's theology from both published and unpublished books, articles and sermons written by Thomas. Primary sources were gathered during a five month research visit to South India, collected from a variety of locations, including United Theological College library archives, Bangalore; Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre, Chennai; and Pennamma Bhavanan, former residence of M.M. Thomas, Tiruvalla. Further archive material was obtained through a close confidant of Thomas, Dr. Jesudas Athyal, Professor at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College. Primary source material was also obtained from New College library and CSCNWW Andrew Walls library, University of Edinburgh.

B) The second phase critically assesses the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas through the eyes of two first generation Dalit theologians, former Bishop of the CSI Madras Diocese, Masilamani Azariah,¹⁰¹ and current Bishop Vedanayagam Devasahayam.¹⁰² This phase of the thesis involved textual research and personal interview technique. The decision to include Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam was made in discussion with Principle Rev. Dr. O.V. Jathanna, Dr. J. Mohan Razu, Rev. Dr. K. Sebastian and Rev. Dr. Muthuraj of United Theological College, Bangalore, as well as Professor Duncan Forrester and Dr. Elizabeth. Koepping, University of Edinburgh. Four main factors determined this decision. 1) George Oommen lists both theologians as 'prominent persons' within the early movement of Dalit theology in the 1980s, thus locating Azariah and Devasahayam as key representatives of emerging Dalit

¹⁰¹ Bishop M. Azariah served as Bishop of the Chennai Diocese of the Church of South India from 1990-2000. He has served as the General Secretary of the Synod of the CSI, and contributed widely to Dalit theological discourse.

¹⁰² V. Devasahayam has been serving as Bishop of the Chennai Diocese of the Church of South India since 2000. Prior to his appointment as Bishop, V. Devasahayam was Professor of Systematic Theology and Head of Dalit Theology at the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Chennai. He was the Convener of the Gurukul Summer Institute in 1996, and both contributor and editor of the subsequent work *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*. He has been a significant contributor to the Dalit theological movement since its inception.

theology.¹⁰³ 2) Azariah and Devasahayam contributed extensively to primary early Dalit theological texts, including the seminal work, *Reader in Dalit Theology*, 1991. Given the limitation of language, these texts, written in English, provide essential source material for critical reflection during the research thesis. 3) Both Azariah and Devasahayam continue to play a dominant role in Dalit theological discourse today, affording me the privilege of meeting with and discussing the theology of M.M. Thomas. 4) Both theologians were familiar with M.M. Thomas's theology, providing an invaluable source of knowledge concerning the thesis subject.

Primary sources for Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam were collected from UTC library, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre library, as well as New College and CSCNWW library, University of Edinburgh. Extensive sources on Dalit theology were also collected, including the foundational works, *Heuristic Explorations*;¹⁰⁴ *Towards a Dalit Theology*;¹⁰⁵ *A Reader in Dalit Theology*;¹⁰⁶ *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*;¹⁰⁷ *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*.¹⁰⁸

C) The final methodological phase assesses the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas through the eyes of twelve 'second generation' Dalit theologians currently studying at United Theological College, Bangalore. Student participation comprised a two hour large group gathering to discuss three of M.M. Thomas's sermons, and included the opportunity to reflect in small groups. The sermons, 'The New Creation in Christ', 'The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History', and 'The Cross and the Kingdom of God', were selected to capture a glimpse of Thomas's theology, taken from a collection of published sermons entitled *New Creation in Christ*.¹⁰⁹ Following the group meeting, personal interviews were conducted with the students in order to continue the discussion

¹⁰³ George Oommen, "The Emerging Dalit Theology: A Historical Appraisal", at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1121>

¹⁰⁴ Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1991

¹⁰⁵ Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Dalit Theology*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1988

¹⁰⁶ Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991

¹⁰⁷ V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997

¹⁰⁸ James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994

¹⁰⁹ M.M. Thomas, *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976

on Thomas's theology, and to evaluate critically the Dalit theological movement over the past three decades. The interviews were conducted as 'purposeful conversations',¹¹⁰ allowing informality and flexibility during the interview. The student contribution is invaluable in critically reflecting upon the emergence and development of Dalit theology in order to assess the thesis that M.M. Thomas's theology remains relevant to present day Dalit theological discourse.

Of the twelve students taking part in the study, eight were studying for a Bachelor of Divinity degree, four for a Masters of Theology; two were women. The majority had only limited prior knowledge of M.M. Thomas's theology. One student, Solomon, had a more comprehensive knowledge of Thomas's theology as a result of his research for a Masters of Theology degree.

Life in community with the students of UTC during my research visit provided many invaluable opportunities for conversation relating to this thesis. These conversations took place following daily worship, during mealtimes, tea breaks and informal walks. This community provided a source of fellowship, encouragement and critical theological engagement essential in building the thesis argument.

1.10. Outline of Chapters

In Chapter I, the historical context in which Dalit theology emerged is examined, including the development of Dalit and Dalit Christian identity within the caste-class-power nexus of India. This allows us to identify the roots of Dalit theological protest which shape the vision and goals of Dalit liberation theology. The Chapter further seeks to identify how Dalit theologians have interpreted the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a paradigmatic principle for Dalit liberation. This will provide the basis on which the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas will be assessed.

I begin Chapter II by examining the Dalit theological assertion of M.M. Thomas as a proponent of *karma mārga*, a position which effectively identifies Thomas as an elite Christian theologian irrelevant for Dalit discourse. In this chapter a summary of M.M. Thomas's theology is outlined, including reflection

¹¹⁰ Robert C. Bogden & Sari Knopp Biklen, *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, Boston: Ally and Bacon, Inc. 1982, p. 135

upon the Cross and New Humanity in Christ, set within the broader framework of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. This is necessary in providing the theological framework for assessing the contribution of Thomas to Dalit theology.

In Chapter III key points of theological resonance in the theology of M.M. Thomas and Dalit theologian, Bishop M. Azariah, will be identified. Examining Thomas's theology within the caste-class-power nexus of India, it is argued that Thomas's reflections on humanisation, liberation and conscientisation, were significantly relevant for emerging Dalit theology from the perspective of Bishop Azariah.

In Chapter IV the theology of M.M. Thomas is examined through critical discourse with Bishop V. Devasahayam. Through this discourse, key theological points of resonance will be identified. In particular, Thomas's theological reflections upon humanisation, dignity and justice will be examined.

In Chapter V M.M. Thomas's theological reflections upon the paradigm of New Humanity in Christ will be assessed through further critical discourse with Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam. This Chapter also identifies significant theological differences between Thomas and first generation Dalit theologians, including the concept of sin and God's 'direct option' for the Dalits.

In Chapter VI the contribution of second generation Dalit theologians will be critically applied to the theological discourse generated in this thesis between M.M. Thomas, Azariah and Devasahayam. In this Chapter Dalit students assess three sermons delivered by M.M. Thomas, determining the relevance of Thomas's theology for present day Dalit discourse in light of their critical assessment of first generation Dalit theology.

Each Chapter serves to offer a further piece of the collective picture being drawn concerning M.M. Thomas's theology. Read as a whole, the picture becomes clearer, substantiating the thesis that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence and continued development of Dalit theology.

Chapter I: Dalit Identity and the Emergence of Dalit Theology

1. Introduction

In this chapter I examine the rise of Dalit theology, locating the historical development of Dalit and Dalit Christian identity within the caste-class-power context of India. This overview provides an essential foundation for the research thesis, establishing key theological elements of Dalit theology on which the contribution of M.M. Thomas may be assessed, including the Dalit quest for humanisation, justice and dignity within the Indian context. In the second part of this chapter I examine how Dalit Christian theologians interpret the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as a paradigmatic principle for Dalit liberation.

2. Dalit Identity

*It is self-evident that untouchability, a most venomous evil of Hindu society, has dehumanised a sizeable section of humanity, called untouchables.*¹

M.E. Prabhakar describes the Dalit condition as one of ‘destitution and dehumanisation’.² Dalits have been “excluded from the caste system, hence *Outcastes*; declared ritually unclean, hence *Untouchables*; and pushed out of fear of pollution to live on the outskirts of villages, hence *Segregated*.”³ Dalits are considered ‘non-persons’ as a result of caste system.⁴ K.P. Kuruvila comments:

Dalits have been the most degraded, downtrodden, exploited and the least educated in our society. They have been socially and culturally, economically and politically subjugated and marginalized through three thousand years of our history. It is through centuries of serfdom that the Dalits have been reduced to the state of *no people*.”⁵

¹ R.K. Kshirsagar, *Dalit Movement in India and Its Leaders (1857-1956)*, New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1994, p. 9

² M.E. Prabhakar, “The Search for a Dalit Theology”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, p. 206

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ K.P. Kuruvila, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, p. 25

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 171

As an outcaste community within Hindu society, Dalits have been perceived as 'ontologically separate' from all other humans,⁶ excluded from relationship with the divine.⁷ The Dalit struggle is the struggle of an untouchable, dehumanised people made strangers in their native soil, deprived of personal dignity and basic human rights.⁸ This is the context in which Dalit theology emerged in 1980s India.

Use of the term Dalit, notes Fr. Dionysius Rasquinha, represents a rejection of the Brahminic theory of caste hierarchy, including *karma* and the Hindu concept of purity and pollution:

In my understanding, the term *dalit* (a) identifies the upper caste and upper class oppressors and the structures they have created as the causes of the oppression of the dalits rather than the fate or the karma of their past actions and so, expresses the dalit striving for liberation, (b) stands for the affirmation of the human dignity of people in their dalitness challenging the brahminic decision to grade their humanity and structure a society on the basis of the values of purity and pollution.⁹

Brahminic theory is thus rejected by Dalits affirming their equality, dignity and humanity. Indeed, argues James Massey, acceptance of 'dalitness' is the first step towards transformation into 'full and liberated human beings.'¹⁰

2.1 The Religio-Philosophical roots of the Caste System

The highly complex nature of India's caste system is evidenced by the widespread and controversial debate and diversity generated by interpreters.¹¹

⁶ Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 33

⁷ Interview, Dr. James Massey, UTC, Bangalore, 25 January, 2006

⁸ M. Azariah, "Doing Dalit Theology in India Today", R.S. Sugirtharaj & Cecil Hargreaves, ed. *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, Vol. 1, 2003, p. 39

⁹ Fr. Dionysius Rasquinha, "Reflections on Dalit Christian Theology", James Massey & S. Lourduswamy, ed., *Dalit Issue in Today's Theological Debate*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies/Subaltern (Theology), 2003, p. 51

¹⁰ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, p. 13

¹¹ See K.L. Sharma, *Social Stratification in India*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997; C.J. Fuller, ed. *Caste Today*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996; Susan Bayly, "Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age", *The New Cambridge History of India*, vol. IV, no. 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; M.N. Srinivas, ed. *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997; Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; Ursula Sharma, *Caste*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1999. For a study of

The origin of the caste system can be traced to the ancient *Vedic* texts of the Hindu tradition. While there has been disagreement over the relationship of Hinduism to caste, as demonstrated in the polarity of thought in F.G. Bailey and Louis Dumont,¹² the position taken here is that the origin and development of caste is integrally related to the emergence of Hindu religiosity in India. M.E. Prabhakar argues that the practice and principles of caste are rooted in the religio-philosophical traditions of the Hindu tradition, providing the doctrinal basis for caste discrimination and the concept of Dalit 'impurity'.¹³ Duncan Forrester notes that the caste system has been understood as a "hierarchy based on religiously sanctioned concepts of 'purity and pollution.'"¹⁴

Although the caste system evolved and was gradually systematized over the course of time, the *R̥g Veda*, composed between 1500-1200B.C.,¹⁵ mentions the existence of the four castes when it says of *Puruṣa*, the 'original man': "When they divided the *Puruṣa*, into how many parts did they arrange him? What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are his thighs and feet called? The *brāhmin* was his mouth, his two arms were made the *rājanya* [*kshatriya*], his two thighs the *vaiśyas*, from his feet the *śūdra* was born."¹⁶ Indian castes are thus grounded in a social theory which posits four principal hierarchical *varṇas*, or 'classes'; the *brahmins*, the most pure, charged with religious and priestly tasks; the *ksatriyas*, or 'warriors', charged with defence and political rule; the *Vaiśyas*, charged with agriculture and trade; and the *śūdras*, charged with servitude.¹⁷ Although in the contemporary setting there is great diversity, with up to 6400

Christianity's encounter with caste see Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, London: Curzon Press Ltd, 1979

¹² F.G. Bailey observes that caste may be understood without reference to any ideological factors or connectedness to Hinduism. In direct opposition to this thought, Louis Dumont interprets caste as being integrally connected to Hinduism, and therefore inconceivable outside the Hindu context. Duncan Forrester, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-8.

¹³ M.E. Prabhakar, *op. cit.*, p. 203

¹⁴ Duncan Forrester, *op. cit.*, p. 4

¹⁵ John Brockington, *The Sacred Thread*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996, p. 7

¹⁶ *R̥g Veda*, X, 90. 11-12. See, S. Radhakrishnan & C.A. Moore, ed. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 19. This section comes from the *Puruṣasukta*, and is later in origin to the original composition of the *R̥g Veda*. See K.P. Kuruvila, *op. cit.*, p. 21

¹⁷ Brian K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 9

castes and sub-castes,¹⁸ each is theoretically reducible to one of the four *varṇas*.¹⁹ Those who do not fall into one of these categories are considered *outcaste*.

Reference to the divine body is critical, suggests Massey, in understanding the Dalit condition outside the caste structure. All those who fall within the *varṇas* are deemed to be in relationship with the divine by virtue of birth *within* the divine body. The Dalits however, “did not have any right to call themselves human, because they did not have any relationship with the divine.”²⁰ Dalits were thus perceived as ‘non-human’, grounded in religio-philosophical interpretations of humanity based on relationship to the divine.

Over the centuries the systematization of the caste system reinforced the dehumanized status of the Dalits. In the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* human destiny is determined by conduct:

[t]hose who are of pleasant conduct here- the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a *brāhmin*, or the womb of a *ṣatriya*, or the womb of a *vaiśya*. But those who are of stinking conduct here- the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an outcast.²¹

The encounter between Lord Rama and Samvuka in the great epic, the *Ramāyaṇa* (5th Century B.C.) further reinforced the ideology of caste hierarchy. Although a *śūdra*, a low caste disallowed to partake in *tapasya*, Samvuka sought to attain divinity through meditation and penance. Lord Rama, on hearing that Samvuka had been blamed for the death of a *brāhmin* boy, drew his sword and decapitated Samvuka, an action which resulted in the gods restoring the life of the *brāhmin* boy.²² Such references, notes Massey, reinforced over time the entrenched notion of low caste and outcaste degradation.²³

By the time of the composition of the *Manusmṛti* (200-700 A.D.), Massey argues, the depraved identity of the Dalit reached its climax.²⁴ These ‘Laws of

¹⁸ Andreas D’Souza, “Theology of Relationship”, from *The Canadian Churches’ Forum for Global Ministries*, No. 14, 2002/3, p. 2

¹⁹ Brian K. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 9

²⁰ Interview, James Massey, 25th January, 2006

²¹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (V.X. verse 7) S. Radhakrishnan & C.A. Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67

²² James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995, pp. 40-41

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 40

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43

Manu' became a codified social *dharma*, acknowledging the non-human state of the outcaste, those born from a union between inter-caste marriages: "The dwelling of the Chandalas and Cavpacas [outcaste] (should be) outside the village... Their clothes should be the garments of the dead, and their ornaments (should be) of iron, and their food in broken dishes; and they must constantly wander about."²⁵ The laws of Manu effectively sanctioned and codified the concept of pollution into a daily living reality for Dalits, whose social conditioning was directly related to birth-ascribed caste status.²⁶

It is clear that the system of caste emerged over a significant period of time within the Indian historical context. Through sacred text, story and written social codification, the caste system became entrenched in the social fabric of Indian religious and cultural life, encompassing all inhabitants of the nation, including the Dalits themselves.²⁷ This is the context in which Dalit identity has been historically shaped, and the context in which Dalit theology is located.

2.2. Purity-Pollution

Louis Dumont's pivotal work *Homo Hierarchicus*, offered a unified and structured framework for understanding the caste system based on the "single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure."²⁸ Influenced by Celestin Bouglé,²⁹ Dumont held that the opposition of pure and the impure created the holistic social principle of 'hierarchy', determining the gradation of status, rules of separation, and division of labour between caste groups.³⁰ For Dumont, the "preoccupation with the pure and the impure is the constant in Hindu life."³¹ Within this system the *brāhman*, due to his priestly function, is 'above all, purity.'³² In his structural interpretation of caste, Dumont notes that

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42

²⁶ V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness: A Dalit Perspective", in Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, p. 4

²⁷ Editorial, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, p. 3

²⁸ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, trans. Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont & Basai Gulati, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 43. For initial responses to Dumont's work see, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. V, Delhi: Vikas Publications, December, 1971

²⁹ Celestin Bouglé, "The Essence of Reality of Caste System", Louis Dumont & D. Pocock, eds. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Paris & The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1958

³⁰ Louis Dumont *op. cit.*, p. 44

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45

³² *Ibid.*, p. 70

the conception of impurity of the Untouchable is “conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahman”; thus the impure and the pure mutually reinforce one another.³³ For Dumont, ‘untouchability’ would not truly disappear “until the purity of the Brahman is itself radically devalued.”³⁴

The deep-rooted historical axis of purity and pollution runs at the heart of the Indian context in which Dalits identity has been construed, constituted and reinforced over generations, determining all facets of Dalit life including location, education, worship, occupation and marriage. The Dalits have traditionally lived outside the village in separate hamlets. In temple-centred village systems, Dalits were banned from entering the temple and their gods considered inferior to the pure Brahminical gods. Dalits were banned from schools and access to village roads and public wells. Dalits traditionally had birth-ascribed occupations considered intrinsically polluting, such as scavenging or working with leather.³⁵ Based on the structural interpretation of Dumont the ‘pure’ groups depend on the ‘impure’ groups in order to “protect themselves from contamination.”³⁶ Dalits therefore “become a polluting people for keeping other people clean. We [Dalits] are doing the scavenging to keep other people clean and in the process we become polluting people.”³⁷

Avoiding the co-mingling of pure and impure, the caste system becomes rigidly endogamous, ensuring little opportunity for co-mingling of upper and lower caste persons. The system perpetuates through the closure of one group to another in this regard, although we may agree with Jonathan Parry that, “the real objection is to miscegeny with inferiors and not to unions with superiors.”³⁸ Here Parry agrees with Dumont’s assertion: “The separation or closure of one group with respect to those above results fundamentally from the closure of other groups with respect to those below.”³⁹

Dalit theology emerged in response to the degradation of the social stratification based on the identity of polluting untouchability. Parry notes in his

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 54

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ V. Devasahayam, “Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness; A Dalit Perspective”, *op. cit.*, p. 5

³⁶ V. Devasahayam, “Dimensions of Dalit Dilemma”, Andreas Nehring, ed. *Prejudice: Issues in Third World Theologies*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran College and Research Institute, 1996, p. 279

³⁷ Interview, Bishop V. Devasahayam, CSI Diocesan Office, Chennai, 21st November, 2005

³⁸ Jonathan Parry, *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 86

³⁹ *Ibid.*; Louis Dumont, *op. cit.*, p. 123

work, *Caste and Kinship in Kangra*, that when people rank the castes of their local area on a ladder of relative prestige, they make a number of discriminations which have no apparent material basis, such as resources, power or wealth, suggesting that analysis of caste cannot be detached from the realm of its underpinning ideology.⁴⁰

3. Caste-Class-Power Nexus

Bishop Devasahayam identifies the caste system as the Original sin in India.⁴¹ Indeed he argues that caste becomes the paradigmatic principle for Dalit protest and Dalit theology.⁴² Indian Christian theologians, including M.M. Thomas, are rejected by first generation Dalit theologians for failing to adequately name caste as the evil in Indian society. If we can demonstrate, however, that Dalit theology is essentially located in a broader ‘caste-class-power’ nexus, a wider foundation is established for assessing the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas. This is not an attempt to dilute the reality of caste, but rather to recognise the significance of class and power present within Dalit theological scholarship.

While acknowledging that the caste system is rooted in the Vedic texts, Mendelsohn and Vicziany argue that these texts also represent the attempt of the invading Aryans to create a social order in order to assert ‘moral, political and economic superiority’ over the original inhabitants of the land.⁴³ Dumont’s structural rigidity in interpreting caste offers little scope for reflection on issues such as class and power. Fr. Dionysius Rasquinha suggests the study of Indian history by Indian Christians demonstrates the inter-dependence and connectedness of several factors, including economic, political, social and religio-cultural elements, which have contributed to the perpetuation of cumulative domination faced by the Dalits.⁴⁴ There is a need therefore, to move beyond a narrow focus on caste if we are to understand more comprehensively the context in which Dalit theology emerged. Rasquinha suggests the need to

⁴⁰ Jonathan Parry, *op. cit.*, p. 84

⁴¹ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam, CSI Diocesan Office, Chennai, 21st November, 2005

⁴² V. Devasahayam, “Turn to God, rejoice in Hope: A Dalit Perspective”, *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, November, 1998, p. 9

⁴³ Oliver Mendelsohn & Marika Vicziany, *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 7

⁴⁴ Fr. Dionysius Rasquinha, “Reflections on Dalit Christian Theology”, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63

adopt a 'class-caste' framework in order to understand the multifaceted and interconnected reality of Indian context.⁴⁵ Here we go one step further and argue that Dalit theology is most adequately located in a caste-class-power nexus.

3.1. Class

M.E. Prabhakar suggests that caste and class are inseparably bound together to form a caste-class nexus which “undergirds, permeates through and prevails upon all socio-cultural and politico-economic life relationships of social institutions and communities.”⁴⁶ It is argued that while class in the Indian context cannot be effectively understood without reference to caste, it is beneficial to understand caste in reference to class, particularly in the post-Independence era. The issue of class analysis has been one of continued debate within Dalit circles. The use of Marxist analysis predominant in the context of Latin American liberation theology has been criticized by Indian theologians such as Saral Chatterji and Arvind Nirmal, who argue that such analysis fails to appreciate the reality and uniqueness of the caste factor within the Indian context.⁴⁷ Chatterji notes that it is not sufficient to pursue Marxist patterns of analysis which examine cultural or economic factors in isolation, but rather to discover the “linkages, the nexus, the inter-dependence or interaction between different dimensions of...reality.”⁴⁸ Abraham Ayrookuzhiel is also critical of the Marxian class approach attempted by Leftist movements in India, for failing to see the intrinsic relationship between religio-cultural values and concepts and the socio-economic and political structures of India.⁴⁹

André Béteille notes that within traditional Indian society there was great consistency between the class system and the caste structure, commenting: “One can even say, with some risk of oversimplification, that the class system was

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63

⁴⁶ M.E. Prabhakar, “Developing a Common Ideology for Dalits of Christian and Other Faiths”, Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, p. 55

⁴⁷ Saral Chatterji, “Why Dalit Theology”, A.P. Nirmal, ed. *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 23-24; Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology”, *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1991, p. 141;

⁴⁸ Saral K. Chatterji, “Some Aspects of Dalit Ideology”, Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Ideology*, p. 5

⁴⁹ Godwin Shiri, “Study of Religion: Ayrookuzhiel’s Search for a New Approach in the Context of Dalit Struggle”, *Religion and Society*, Vo. 45, No. 3, September 1998, p. 40

largely subsumed under the caste structure.”⁵⁰ Yet today, he argues, the class system cannot be seen to be neatly categorized as an aspect of the caste system. The traditional structure of land ownership and production of goods, which had previously been constructed on caste lines, no longer follows such rigid caste patterns.⁵¹ Technological advancement and globalised economic developments, as well as shifts in land ownership and production of goods, have given rise to greater opportunities for economic mobilization and the creation of a new Middle class in India. While such economic mobility has not benefited the vast majority of Dalits, the shift in the economic landscape is a factor which must be acknowledged in reference to the question of Dalit identity. The 1973 Dalit Panther Manifesto states:

The dalit is no longer merely an untouchable outside the village walls and the scriptures. He is an Untouchable, and he is a Dalit, but he is also a worker, a landless labourer, a proletarian...Panthers will paralyzingly attack untouchability, casteism and economic exploitation.⁵²

Certainly, notes Fr. Rasquinha, the question of economic injustice and overwhelming poverty of the vast majority of people in India place the issue of class as a central concern within the framework of caste analysis.⁵³

Another primary concern for Dalit theology is the existential reality of Dalit poverty and hunger. Sister Shalini Mulackal observes: “For the women I met in Tiruvetriyur, the basic requirement is of hunger. They, together with their children and other family members experience endemic hunger...This lack of food indeed is one of the major sufferings of the dalits.”⁵⁴ Given this reality the importance of the complex and integral relation between caste and class is apparent. Thus while agreeing with Dr. Mohan Razu that caste still plays the

⁵⁰ André Bétaille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tranjore Village*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 191

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 43

⁵³ Fr. Dionysius Rasquintha, “Reflections on Dalit Christian Theology”, *op. cit.*, p. 62. In a study on the causes of violence in the State of Bihar, Mendelsohn and Vicziany observe that the conflicts which occur are as much a class struggle as they are a caste struggle. Here Dalit disputes are determined primarily on the issue of land ownership, and not specifically on caste identity. See, Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-62

⁵⁴ Shalini Mulackal, “Hunger for Food and Thirst for Dignity; Well-Being as Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Soteriology”, James Massey & S. Lourduswamy, ed. *Dalit Issue in Today's Theological Debate*, pp. 84-85

major role in the social and economic life of India,⁵⁵ such developments warrant a broadening of the research framework of enquiry in relation to caste-class dynamics. Indeed it is in this framework that Dalit theology may be located.

3.2. Power

Scott and Marshall define power as an issue which lies at “the heart of the subject of social stratification.”⁵⁶ Thus it is deemed necessary to include power as an essential component of analysis. Although no one theory of power will be sufficient for a study of the Dalits in the Indian context, the following points are considered relevant to this enquiry.

Max Weber was primarily concerned with understanding power as it relates to situations of conflicting interests. He defined power as, “the chance of...men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.”⁵⁷ Here the notion of conflict is significant, with an individual or group attaining their will regardless of resistance. Weber’s theory is relevant for Dalits in a situation where they seek to consciously resist the power of hegemonic forces. Despite resistance, the power of the oppressor enforces and reinforces Dalit oppression, indignity and rights.

The concept of power as understood by Robert Dahl, whereby, “A has power over B to do something that B would not otherwise do”,⁵⁸ while limited by its reliance of observable outcomes of success or defeat, also becomes applicable to the Indian context. Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar narrates the story of Irulan Subban, a Dalit who dared to stand for a local election in order to gain a seat reserved for Dalits. In light of his application a dominant caste leader set up his Dalit servant, Thanikodi, to run in opposition to Subban. During the election, Thanikodi was elected, only to relinquish his position the following day in favour

⁵⁵ Dr. I. John Mohan Razu, *Globalization and Dalitho-Ethics: Interrelationships between Homo-economics and Homo-hierarchicus*. New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern studies, 2004, p. 9

⁵⁶ John Scott & Gordon Marshall, *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 515

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C.W. Mills, London: Routledge, Keegan and Paul, 1970

⁵⁸ Quoted in Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p. 16

of his master. Subban fled the village in fear.⁵⁹ Here we witness a blend in the Weberian and Dahlian concept of power at work in a local context.

A further understanding of power has been suggested by Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz, who argue:

Power is also exercised when *A* devotes his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process...*B* is prevented, for all practical purposes, from bringing to the fore any issues that might in their resolution be seriously detrimental to *A*'s set of preferences.⁶⁰

Certainly the historical subjugation of the Dalits in India has limited their social and political voice, restricting the power to challenge systems of oppression. Yet the political space afforded to Dalits in post-Independent India has been a significant, if limited, development, shaping the strategic objectives of Dalit movements, including Dalit theology. Here, 'non-decision-making' power becomes a struggle to obtain 'decision-making power'.

A further dimension of power is suggested by Steven Lukes, who recognizes that power does not necessitate the presence of conflict. For Lukes, power is most effectively used when conflict is *prevented* in the first place.⁶¹

Lukes asks:

[i]s not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?⁶²

Bishop M. Azariah argues that belief in the Hindu doctrines of *karma* ensures Dalits accept their station in life as determined by fate resulting from the good or bad deeds of a previous birth.⁶³ As victims of this belief system the Dalits were, "rendered incapable of taking any initiative to change, alter or improve their own life situation – controlled by apathy and inertia, self-pity, self-negation and self-

⁵⁹ Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, "Skin, Body and Blood: Explorations for Dalit Hermeneutics", *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, No. 2&3, June & September, 2004, pp. 110-111

⁶⁰ Quoted in Steven Lukes, *op. cit.*, p. 20

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 28

⁶³ Bishop Masilamani Azariah, "Dalit Problem is not Poverty but Denial of Human Rights", *Dalit Voice*, Vol. 13, No. 23, October 16-31, 1984, p. 8

hatred.”⁶⁴ Here Lukes’s reflections on power become relevant. In the aforementioned story, Anderson-Rajkumar notes that the village priest informed Thanikodi that God was angry for contesting the election. This prompted Thanikodi to relinquish his newly elected status to his master. The following year when a second Dalit contesting the election fell ill with Tuberculosis, Dalits believed that God was unhappy with their quest to attain a position they had not been born for.⁶⁵ Indeed, the majority of the village Dalits believe it unthinkable that one of them might become a *panchayat* president,⁶⁶ demonstrating the power of hegemonic caste ideology. As the Mandal Commission Report states: “The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the Lower castes in accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as part of the natural order of things.”⁶⁷ Lukes’s definition of power is thus particularly relevant to a study of Dalit theology which seeks to overcome Dalit acceptance of inferiority resulting from hegemonic caste ideology.

While no single dimension of power may be applicable to all situations in our enquiry, the issue of power remains essentially significant, suggesting a point of departure from Dumont. While Dumont acknowledged the category of power in the relationship of the priest to the king, namely between the *Brahmins* and the *Ksatriyas*, he differentiated between power and status, emphasizing the subordination of the king to the priest. Thus for Dumont, “power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood.”⁶⁸ Gerald D. Berreman is critical of Dumont’s notion that power, economic and political factors are epiphenomenal to caste, claiming that the power-status dichotomy is a false one.⁶⁹ Rather, Berreman states that power and status must go together, as ‘two sides of the same coin.’⁷⁰ For Berreman, Dumont’s holistic interpretation suggests a Brahminical view of caste. Avoiding the reality of power in relation to the Indian context, he suggests, fails to recognize that caste, empirically, means:

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Dr. Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, *op. cit.*, p. 111

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Quoted in James Massey, “Historical Roots”, *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 45

⁶⁸ Louis Dumont *op. cit.*, pp. 71-77

⁶⁹ Gerrald D. Berreman, “The Brahminical View of Caste”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. V, Delhi: Vikas Publications, December, 1971, p. 19

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

[i]nstitutional inequality, guaranteed differential access to the valued things in life...The human meaning of caste for those who live it is power and vulnerability, privilege and oppression, honour and denigration, plenty and want, reward and deprivation, security and anxiety. As an anthropological document, a description of caste which fails to convey this is a travesty in the world today; as much so as would be an account of colonialism which ignored its costs to the colonized in glorifying the benefits to the colonizers.⁷¹

While we agree with Susan Bayly that there is greater benefit in taking seriously Dumont's formulations than dismissing them altogether,⁷² particularly in bringing to the forefront of the debate the issue of purity and pollution so relevant to the Dalit theological discourse, we must move beyond such rigid formulations if we are to understand the shifting and dynamic realities of caste for Dalits in India.

André Béteille identifies significant changes in the patterns of power accumulation and distribution in the Indian context, making the relationship between caste and power much more complex than had traditionally been the case. Béteille observes that since Independence, "traditional social status was no longer the supreme basis of power."⁷³ Traditionally, he notes, Brahmins enjoyed a great proportion of power and authority within the village context based on ownership of land, high social and ritual status as well as superior education.⁷⁴ Yet Béteille identifies a shift in the loci of power developing independently of caste as a result of political adjustments through Government representational requirements at local and regional level, including shifts in patterns of land ownership and economic organization, and the rise of popular leaders gaining numerical support.⁷⁵

On a recent research visit to the Tumkur district of Karnataka these shifts in power were evident. Here, through the work of the Rural Education for Development Society, Dalit village communities have formed Dalit *panchayats* rather than adhering to the traditional *panchayat* of the caste village. Dalits in the village have thus come to represent a unified body, prompting a shift in political

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20

⁷² Susan Bayly, "Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age", *The New Cambridge History of India*, p. 23

⁷³ André Béteille, *op. cit.*, p. 152

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-225

and social relations with the caste community. Although Dalit representation is obliged by law on political councils, including the village and regional *panchayats*, Dalit candidates have been controlled by the upper-caste, ensuring little change in local and regional status quo under the control of traditional hegemonic forces. In Tumkur villages, however, Dalits now stand together as a unified body of voters, affording them negotiating power with caste leaders. Dalits in the village have the potential to offer support for caste leaders depending on the assurance of reciprocal support for their nominated Dalit candidate. Such negotiating power in the political realm has resulted in greater representation on local and regional *panchayats*, bringing greater benefits to Dalits in this region.⁷⁶

Significantly, the shift in power relations at the political level has altered the dynamics of relationships within the Tumkur region. The number of atrocities committed against Dalits in this region has been significantly reduced, relations within the village have improved, and Dalit children have been attending local schools in greater numbers. The power shift has also been witnessed through the response of the police, who now deal with Dalit issues with greater professionalism than had previously been the case.⁷⁷ As K.C. Abraham observes, power is now recognized as a significant factor in the Dalit struggle: “The dalits and other marginalized groups are using for the first time their group identity to gain a new self-consciousness and a source of power in their struggle for justice and participation.”⁷⁸

Power thus becomes an essential component of our framework of enquiry, relevant to discourse on Dalit identity, consciousness and Dalit theology. It is relevant when considering the relationship of Dalits to non-Dalits, but also, significantly, relations between Dalits. Here we must heed the caution of Dr. J. Jayakiran Sebastian, who argues against a simplistic understanding of power in binary terms of the *powerful* and the *powerless*:

⁷⁶ These findings resulted from a visit to villages in the Tumkur district with working representatives of the Rural Education for Development Society (REDS), under the leadership and guidance of M.C. & Jyothi Raj.

⁷⁷ Interview with Jobi, M.C. and Jyothi Raj, Tumkur, 9-10th November, 2005.

⁷⁸ Dr. K.C. Abraham, “Oppression: An Asian Theological Perspective”, *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies: Issue on Dalit Theology*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, Vol. XVI, No. 1&2, 2005, p. 41

[o]ne has to recognize that however one is positioned in the social hierarchy, the possibility that one not only has access to power, but that power is wielded, can be used or abused in relation to those in juxtaposition to us, cannot be underestimated or denied in any simplistic claim of not having power.⁷⁹

Here Sebastian moves beyond the scope of Béteille's study to acknowledge the complexity of power within individual relationships. It is important to realise that power dynamics are present not merely at a structural level, but within interpersonal relations both beyond and within the Dalit community. This concern is particularly pertinent to the issue of gender relations within a given community, a factor which will be addressed further in Chapter VI.

In light of the above, and in our quest at this stage to locate the broader context in which the Dalit theological movement emerged and exists, it is argued that the caste-class-power nexus is the most appropriate for framing our enquiry. Such a framework demonstrates the dynamic and fluid nature of the Indian contextual reality within which Dalit theology emerged and continues today.

3.3. The changing context of Independent India

The years after Independence were marked by a 'certain optimism' with regard to the 'Untouchables', particularly in light of modernism.⁸⁰ Led by the socialist-minded Jawaharlal Nehru, caste was being regarded politically as an enemy of national unity and Untouchability as the 'darkest side' of Indian culture.⁸¹ Dramatic shifts in political, legal and economic language through Secular Democratic Governance prompted a shift in the relationship between caste, class and power. As C.J. Fuller observes, "caste hierarchy can no longer be legitimately defended in public."⁸² Within the public arena, notes Béteille, "anyone who speaks against equality in public is bound to lose his audience."⁸³

The Constitution of India was acclaimed as going "further than most modern Constitutions, including the American, in inscribing the commitment to

⁷⁹ Dr. J. Jayakiran Sebastian, "Oppression-An Asian Theological Perspective; A Response", *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies: Issue on Dalit Theology*, p. 46

⁸⁰ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 118

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² C.J. Fuller, ed. *Caste Today*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 13

⁸³ *Ibid.*

equality”,⁸⁴ denoting the shift taking place within Indian public discourse. Article 17 of the Constitution declared: “‘Untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The enforcement of any disability out of ‘Untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law.”⁸⁵ Article 14 granted equality for all before the law and Article 15 prohibited discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or birth. Article 16 provided for equality of opportunity relating to public employment, while Article 45 asserted provision of free education for all children below fourteen years of age. Article 46 specifically promoted educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, including Scheduled Castes and Tribes, protecting them from ‘social injustice and all forms of exploitation.’⁸⁶ Government initiatives ranging from land reform, 5-year economic development plans, and compensatory discrimination for Scheduled Castes, sought to ease the plight and condition of Dalits. The Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) served to add legal authority and protection for Dalits. As a result of such efforts popular perception, suggest Mendelsohn and Vicziany, is that while discrimination against Dalits still exists, this is nothing more than ‘anachronistic residue’ that will dry up as the economic conditions of the Dalits improve.⁸⁷

Beyond legislative efforts, however, caste has continued to influence the attitudes and customs of India, proving itself a “mighty instrument for shaping social behaviour...despite government legislation towards its destruction.”⁸⁸ Indeed, Massey notes that India’s political freedom has “only perpetuated the slavery of the Dalits instead of assisting them to get out of it.”⁸⁹ The 1980 Report of the Backward Classes Commission set up to investigate matters relating to the safeguards provided for the Scheduled Castes and Tribes under the Constitution, declared: “...what caste has lost in the ritual front, it has more than gained on the political front.”⁹⁰ While a small minority of Dalits have benefited from quotas in

⁸⁴ André Béteille, *The Backward Classes and the New Social Order*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981

⁸⁵ Human Rights Watch, *Broken People: Caste Violence Against India’s “Untouchables”*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999, Appendix A

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 9

⁸⁸ Duncan Forrester, *op. cit.*, p. 201

⁸⁹ James Massey, “Dalits: Historical Roots”, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 37

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47

education and employment, economic measures implemented by the government have essentially failed the majority of Dalits, who remain in conditions of abject poverty.⁹¹ Despite legislation that would say otherwise, Dalits have been denied equal access to education, medical facilities and employment.⁹² Although many Dalits do not pursue occupations that have traditionally been the polluting mark of their caste, with many seeking employment in the rapidly growing urban centres, Dalits remain an ‘overwhelmingly poor people’, merely exchanging ‘one form of misery for another.’⁹³

There can be little doubt, notes N. Jayaram, that caste has undergone considerable change, but this should not lead us to believe that caste is disappearing. Indeed Jayaram argues that through the Government’s implementation of Mandal Commission recommendations, caste-consciousness and caste-aggrandizement have been strongly abetted, demonstrating the extraordinary capacity of caste to adapt itself to the changing political and socio-economic climate.⁹⁴ Although in the public arena, particularly in the urban setting, many of the barriers against Dalits are less visible, Mendelsohn and Vicziany observe that it is impossible to deny the existence of a ‘fault line’ within Indian society that divides the Dalits from others.⁹⁵ This, they note, remains inextricably linked to the traditional notions of purity and pollution. Although in public spaces, for example on the buses or within schools, there is less evidence of discrimination in both the urban and rural areas, in the private sphere the incidence of discrimination remains a vivid reality.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Dr. I. John Mohan Razu, “Equality & Social Exclusion Polar Opposites: Issues Faced by Dalits-Tribals”, p. 4. Figures representing Dalit employment in Government positions demonstrate that while Dalits represent significant proportions of Class IV menial grade employment, the figures are drastically reduced, with only 5.68% representation of Class I services. 90% of Class I positions are held by upper and middle castes, even though they represent only 20% of the population. M.N. Panini, “The Political Economy of Caste”, M.N. Srinivas, ed. *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1997, pp. 32-33

⁹² Dr. I. John Mohan Razu, “Equality & Social Exclusion Polar Opposites: Issues Faced by Dalits-Tribals”, p. 4

⁹³ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-34

⁹⁴ N. Jayaram, “Caste and Hinduism”, M.N. Srinivas, *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, p. 70

⁹⁵ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 12

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41

4. Dalit Identity Consciousness

In the first Report as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes, 1951, L.M. Shrikant provides a glimpse of the Dalit condition during the early post-Independence period:

Caste in Hindu Society is still the most powerful factor in determining a man's dignity, calling or profession...By force of habit the Harijan [Dalit] has lost his self-respect to such an extent that he regards his work to which his caste is condemned not as a curse from which he should extricate himself but as a privilege or preserve, which he must protect. He has not much courage to seek another job in field or factory. He has thus become lazy in mind and body and callous to his own condition.⁹⁷

These words reveal the hegemonic power of the caste system to, “transform the person into such a self-captivity or a slavery from which it seems almost impossible to be liberated.”⁹⁸ Bishop Azariah terms this reality the ‘wounded psyche’, suggesting a psychological condition affecting Dalit self-dignity and human worth.⁹⁹ This condition is evidenced by Dalit acceptance of their status in life as determined by the doctrine of *karma*, resonant with Lukes’ ‘third-dimensional’ understanding of power.

The acceptance of karmic fate implies that Dalit consciousness has been influenced and reinforced within the ideological framework of the hierarchical caste system. Michael Moffatt argues that Dalits religiously, culturally and socially express themselves in line with the Hindu ideology of purity and pollution.¹⁰⁰ Moffatt observed that the Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu act in compliance with the undercurrent ideology, reinforcing their position within the caste hierarchy. Accepting Dumont’s consensual model Moffatt suggested that every,

⁹⁷ Report dated 31st December, 1951. The Position of Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Tribes was established under Article 338 of the Constitution to safeguard Constitutional provisions afforded these communities. James Massey, *Dalits in India: Religion as a Source of Bondage or Liberation with Special Reference to Christians*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1995, p. 58

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Bishop M. Azariah, *op. cit.*, p. 8

¹⁰⁰ Sathianathan Clarke, “Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religions and a Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity”, *Religion and Society: Dalit Concerns*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, 2004, pp. 30-48; Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979; Moffatt, “Untouchables and the Caste System: A Tamil case study”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 9, No.1, 1975, pp. 111-122

[f]undamental entity, relationship and action found in the religious system of the higher castes is also found in the religious system of the Untouchable...Untouchables and high caste actors hold virtually identical cultural constructs, that they are in nearly total conceptual and evaluative consensus with one another.¹⁰¹

Moffatt's consensus or 'structural replication' model has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the reality of Dalit 'dissent' within the dynamics of the community. By observing Dalit relations to the dominant caste groups, G.K. Garanth suggests that Dalits are not merely passive objects of their subordinate status, but a group seeking to assert their identity and improve their status. Thus Dalits, as a dissenting group, are able to 'play the system' within the limits set by hegemonic forces of caste.¹⁰²

Gerald Berreman also rejects the consensual model, claiming that the 'Untouchables' had opposed the caste system since its inception, struggling as a people consciously disadvantaged by its oppressive hierarchy.¹⁰³ The rise of Buddhism (6th Century B.C.) and the *bhakti* devotional movements of the medieval period denote significant challenges to the graded inequality of caste system. In line with Berreman, Mendelsohn and Vicziany observe continuity between the resistance of the untouchable communities in history and the rise of Dalit consciousness during the British period. Although resistance efforts were silenced through the 'tenacity of orthodox Hinduism', these efforts highlight Dalit attempts to resist their enforced and degraded identity.¹⁰⁴ Indeed, Sebastian Kappen argues that the response of Dalits to Jesus Christ may best be understood in continuity with this tradition of dissent against the Brahminic tradition.¹⁰⁵

During the British period the rise in Dalit identity consciousness sparked a revival of Dalit dissent against their dehumanised status, prompting renewed affirmation of identity in terms of humanity, dignity and respect.¹⁰⁶ The nineteenth century under the British administration created a new social context

¹⁰¹ Michael Moffatt, quoted in Sathianathan Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 33

¹⁰² G.K. Garanth, "Replication or Dissent? Culture and Institutions among 'Untouchable' Scheduled Castes in Karnataka", Dipankar Gupta, ed. *Caste in Question: Identity or Hierarchy*, London & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004, pp. 137-163

¹⁰³ Gerald D. Berreman, *op. cit.*, p. 17

¹⁰⁴ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 26

¹⁰⁵ Sebastian Kappen, "Towards an Indian Theology of Liberation", R.S. Sugirtharaj & Cecil Hargreaves, eds. *Readings in Indian Christian Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, Vol. 1, 2003, p. 34

¹⁰⁶ James Massey, *Introducing Dalit Theology*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2004, p. 16

whereby traditional social relationships were challenged by the influence of the Christian missionaries.¹⁰⁷ The Protestant Christian missionary presence influenced the Depressed Classes greatly, opening up educational and occupational opportunities which laid the foundations for the modern Dalit movement.¹⁰⁸ John Webster traces the rise of the modern Dalit movement to the ‘mass movements’ of 1860-1930, which witnessed the conversion of great numbers of Indians to Islam, Sikhism and particularly Christianity.¹⁰⁹ Significantly, however, the mass movements to Christianity were initiated by the Dalits themselves following initial encounters with missionaries.¹¹⁰ While the influence of Protestant missions played a key foundational role in the emergence of Dalit Christian consciousness, the mass movements arose as an unexpected and dramatic development for the missionaries.¹¹¹ In seeking to understand the motives behind the mass conversions, Forrester suggests that dignity, self-respect, equality and the ability to choose one’s destiny were all powerful incentives to convert. Group conversion was an opportunity for a group to reject their lowly place in Hindu society in order to claim a new social and religious identity defined independently of caste system.¹¹²

The issue of Dalit identity became a key political issue during the struggle for Independence. Samuel Jayakumar notes that Hindus were deeply anxious about any form of Dalit enlightenment that might cause rebellion against the existing social order.¹¹³ Here the tension between Gandhi and Ambedkar is worth noting. While Gandhi sought to ‘Hinduize’ Dalits in order to keep them within the Hindu realm, Ambedkar believed that Dalits needed a separate identity and a popular consciousness as they were a separate element in the traditional life of India:

¹⁰⁷ Bishop Masilamani Azariah, *op. cit.*, p. 7

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1992, p. 33

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Waskom Pickett argues that Christian missionaries did not intentionally initiate such movements, which commonly began when an individual Dalit convert refused to be separated from their local community, thus returning to witness to Christ within that community. See, J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, Lucknow: Lucknow Publishing House, 1969, p. 55. See also, Y. Vincent Kumaradoss, *Robert Caldwell: A Scholar-Missionary in Colonial South India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2007, p. 37

¹¹¹ Duncan Forrester, *op. cit.*, p. 69

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 75-77

¹¹³ Samuel Jayakumar, “Tradition versus Modernity”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, 2004, p. 154

Can an untouchable be held to be part of the Hindu society? Is there any human tie that binds them to the rest of the Hindus? There is none. There is no connubiality. There is no commensalism. There is not even the right to touch, much less to associate. Instead, the mere touch is enough to cause pollution to a Hindu. The whole tradition of the Hindus is to recognize the Dalits as a separate element and insist upon it as a fact.¹¹⁴

Although failing in his attempt to establish separate electorates for Dalits due to pressure created by Gandhi's fast unto death, Ambedkar was able, through the Poona Pact of 1932, to negotiate an increase in the number of seats reserved for Dalit candidates.¹¹⁵ Thus Ambedkar successfully brought Dalit concerns into the political and economic realm of discourse in India, lifting the plight of the Dalits and opening the way for the continued transformation of Dalit consciousness and identity. Indeed the call of Ambedkar to 'organize, educate and agitate' remains a strong call for Dalits today.¹¹⁶ Dalit identity is one which rejects the shameful identity of imposed untouchability. As John Webster observes, where once the Dalit struggle was to end caste, now Dalit identity has become a prime tool in the quest for human rights and justice within a casteist society.¹¹⁷ Thus, Dalits seek to reclaim pride in their Dalit culture, countering both the dominant Hindu culture which defines them as degraded, and any sense of fatalism within their own ranks.¹¹⁸

4.1. Dalit Christian Identity

Thus far in our enquiry attention has been broadly focused on Dalits in the Indian context. Yet the title Dalit 'Christian' denotes reference to a specific category of Dalit, posing a dilemma of identity which critically shapes Dalit theological discourse. In his pioneering work *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Arvind

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, quoted in Vasant Moon, ed. *B.R. Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 9, p. 184

¹¹⁵ Mendelsohn & Vicziany, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-105

¹¹⁶ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, p. 51

¹¹⁷ John C.B. Webster, "Whither Dalit Theology; An Historian's Assessment", James Massey & S. Lourduwamy, *Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, pp. 21-22

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Nirmal asks: “What is Christian about Dalit Theology?”¹¹⁹ His answer is that it is the *dalitness* which is Christian about Dalit theology.¹²⁰ It is the “common dalit experience of Christian dalits along with other dalits that will shape a Christian Dalit Theology.”¹²¹ The term Dalit is thus considered crucial to Dalit Christian theology, for it maintains the essential link of solidarity with non-Christian Dalits. Franklin J. Balasundaram argues that Dalit theology is a reflection by Dalit Christians aimed at overcoming their situation of *dalitness*, done on behalf of the wider Dalit community at large.¹²² Fr. Monodeep Daniel affirms this position:

Whenever a person from a lowly and ostracised section of society mentally and emotionally accepts his/her low and ostracised social position, he/she loses self-respect, self-dignity, spiritual and ethical ideals and inspiration. Such conditioning, which makes a person accept and internalise, defeat, inferiority and meaninglessness end up gripped with a crippled state of mind. In the Indian context the crippling grip of this mental state may be described as “*dalitness*”. The emancipation of dalits has to be precisely from *dalitness*.¹²³

‘Dalitness’ is not of course limited to Dalit Christians. Dalit theology is thus not exclusively concerned with Dalit Christians alone, but seeks to maintain the inextricable link to all Dalits. As Nirmal observes, “the distinctive identity of Dalit theology is inseparably linked with the identity of the Dalit people.”¹²⁴

Dalit theology is thus located in the tension between the search for a Dalit meta-theological narrative which unites Dalits in the struggle for liberation, and diverse micro-theological narratives which reflect Dalit contextual particularity and diversity. In other words, Dalit theologians seek a theological and Christological paradigm which does not sever but essentially *maintains* unity with all Dalits. Dalitness becomes a central term of reference for Christian theological praxis, reflection and discourse, prompting John Mohan Razu to urge

¹¹⁹ Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Dalit Theology”, *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1991, p. 144

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Franklin J. Balasundaram, quoted in John Mohan Razu, “Dalit Theology”, James Massey & Fr. S. Lourduwamy, *A Theology from Dalit Perspective*, New Delhi: Centre of Dalit Studies, 2001, p. 34

¹²³ Fr. Monodeep Daniel, “Demand for Dignity”, James Massey and S. Lourduwamy, eds. *Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies (Theology), 2003, p. 12

¹²⁴ Quoted in Franklyn J. Balasundaram, “The Contribution of A.P. Nirmal and Especially to Dalit Theology”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 45, No. 3, September, 1998, p. 91

Dalit theologians to move beyond the exclusive confines of Dalit Christian identity in order to theologize in reference to Dalit commonalities.¹²⁵

The challenge facing Dalit theologians is exacerbated by the fact that the term Dalit does not represent a homogenous group. As Mendelsohn and Vicziany observe, Dalits are not a people of any singular cultural identity, but a diverse people with different languages, worship practices and folk traditions.¹²⁶ The concept of unity is held in further tension based on the reality of historical diversity and division among Dalit communities. Indeed hierarchy exists between Dalit communities based upon traditional occupations that have historically defined their status in society.¹²⁷ Hierarchical ranking has been entrenched within the Dalit communities, with Dalit groups imposing internal systems of superiority-inferiority and ‘touch-me-not-isms.’¹²⁸ Sudhakar Rao notes that of the two dominant ‘Untouchable’ castes in Andhra Pradesh, the *Malas* and the *Madigas*, there is historical discrepancy over superiority which leads to continuous conflict, tension and feuding between the two.¹²⁹ Similar tension exists in many states across India. Rao notes, for example: “Chalwadis, non-leather workers, claim superior status over Madigas, leather workers in Dharwad town in Karnataka. But Madigas do not accept food from Chalwadis, whereas the latter accept food from the former.”¹³⁰

The attempt to ‘pull rank’ in order to improve status is a common phenomenon among the Dalit communities.¹³¹ During a personal interview, Fr. Maria Arul Raja acknowledged in a manner similar to Moffatt, that the question Dalit Indians always ask is “who is beneath me?”¹³² The internalization of

¹²⁵ John Mohan Razu, *op. cit.*, p. 36

¹²⁶ Medelsohn and Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 9

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ R. Barbara Joshi. ed. *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement*. London: Zed Books, 1986, p. 4

¹²⁹ N. Sudhakar Rao, “A Reconsideration of the Structural Replication in the Tamil Untouchable Castes in South India”, *Religion and Society*, Bangalore: CISRS, Vol. 45, No. 3, 1998, p. 12. In a plea to the Asian Human Rights Commission claiming that the Madigas are the ‘Dalits among the Dalits’, R.Karuppusamy criticized the disproportionate distribution of reservations awarded the Malas, a factor which reinforced the victimization of the Madiga community. See, R.Karuppusamy, “Madigas – Dalits Among the Dalits”, <http://www.rghr.net/mainfile.php/0607/675>

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ N. Jayaram, *op. cit.*, p. 79

¹³² Interview with Fr. M. Arul Raja, 6th January, 2006. Michael Moffatt observed that the *Chakiliyans* of Chingleput, Tamil Nadu, did not accept their lowest position in the social hierarchy, but rather sought to raise themselves in order to be above others. See Michael Moffatt,

hierarchical values and the tension this creates between Dalits is problematic for a discourse of Dalit unity and solidarity, and is an essential concern within the ongoing movement of Dalit theology.

A further source of tension to Dalit unity comes from the reality of ‘Sanskritization’, defined by M.N. Srinivas as:

[t]he process by which a low caste or tribe or other group takes over the customs, ritual beliefs, ideology and style of life of a high and, in particular, a ‘twice born’ caste. The sanskritization of a group has usually the effect of improving its position in the caste hierarchy. It normally presupposes either an improvement in the economic or political position of the group concerned or a higher groups self-consciousness resulting from contact with a source of the ‘Great Tradition’ of Hinduism.¹³³

Sanskritization is a strategy adopted by Dalits resigned to their ascribed fate afforded through religious tradition in order to seek greater approval from within that religious value system.¹³⁴ This process may be traced back to religio-nationalist efforts earlier in the century to bring the Dalits into the unified realm of the Hindu tradition, for example the nominative respect that was afforded Dalits saints and deities within the Hindu religious tradition,¹³⁵ and the Temple Entry proclamations of Travancore, Bombay and Madras.¹³⁶ The phenomenon of Sanskritization is one strategy that has been adopted by Dalits to regain a sense of dignity and respect from within the traditional Indian caste social structure. This raises key questions concerning the relation between Dalits seeking conversion away from the Hindu tradition that has historically defined them, and those who seek to remain within that tradition for social benefit.

A further significant issue relating to the question of Dalit Christian identity is the denial of government benefits awarded to Dalit Christians. Government benefits allocated to Scheduled Castes and Tribes, including reservations in state-run educational institutions and reserved vacancies in public

“Untouchables and the Caste System: A Tamil case study”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1975, pp. 110-122

¹³³ M.N. Srinivas, *The Cohesive Role of Sanskritization and Other Essays*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 77

¹³⁴ K.P. Aleaz, “In Quest for a Dalit Theology”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, 2004, p. 93

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany, *op. cit.*, p. 107

sector employment,¹³⁷ are denied Dalit Christians on the basis of their Christian identity. The Indian Constitution as defined by Article 341 empowers the President of India to determine those who are to be recognized with Scheduled caste status, an order which can only be amended by an Act of Parliament.¹³⁸ The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order of 1950 deemed that: "...no person who professes a religion different from Hindu, shall be deemed a member of a Scheduled Caste."¹³⁹ This paragraph was amended in 1956 by Parliament to include those professing Sikhism, and again in 1990 to include those professing Buddhism. Thus Dalit Christians are granted no legal protection or privilege because the government of India does not recognize their Scheduled caste status.¹⁴⁰

Dalit conversion to Christianity thus has significant social and economic consequences, a reality which Dr. Rajaratnam believes calls for a 'sea change' in the Christian approach to the Dalit issue:¹⁴¹ "The Church must throw away its old paradigm the reward of conversion which in any case offers no mass liberation. Conversion of a Dalit to Christianity represents an option of new form of slavery."¹⁴² Clearly such a position has significant Christological, theological and missiological implications for Dalit theology. K.C. Abraham argues that the reality of secularism and religious pluralism in the Indian context calls for a theological shift from 'Christian exclusivism' to a 'liberative ecumenism', seeking to affirm God's transforming work without relying on Christological formulations in order to assist all people in their struggle for justice and freedom.¹⁴³ Dalit theologians face the challenge of developing a theological

¹³⁷ Jonathan Parry, "The Koli Dilemma", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, No. IV, December, 1970, p. 84 & 124

¹³⁸ Quoted in James Massey, "Historical Roots", James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, p. 38

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle for India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, p. 34. This prohibition of privilege extends to Dalit Muslims, who are not recognized as members of Scheduled Caste. This position is being challenged through the Supreme Court of India on both Constitutional grounds of discrimination and on the basis that conversion to Christianity has not altered the social or economic conditions of the Dalits, an argument which proved successful for the inclusion of Buddhism to Scheduled caste status. See, Archbishop A.M. Chinnappa & Philip Raj, "Ensuring Equal Rights to all Dalits", *The Hindu*, 22nd September, 2005

¹⁴¹ Dr. K. Rajaratnam, "The Indian Christian Church and the Dalit Liberation: A New Agenda for the Church in India", *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. XI, Nos. 1&2, 2001, p. 4

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ K.C. Abraham, "Paradigm Shift in Contemporary Theological Thinking", Andreas Nehring, ed. *Prejudice: Issues in Third World Theologies*, Chennai: Gurukul Theological College and Research Institute, 1996, p. 40 & 47

paradigm inclusive for the liberation of all Dalits. Dalit theology seeks therefore to move beyond Christian exclusivity, working alongside other Dalits in the struggle for Dalit emancipation.¹⁴⁴

5. Dalit Christology

Christology is central to Christian theology. As Jacques Dupuis observes:

Christian theology will essentially be Christocentric. This does not mean that Christology exhausts the whole of theology, but it provides it with the necessary key of understanding; it is the principle of interpretation of the entire edifice. Protology and eschatology, anthropology and theology, ecclesiology and sacramentology all are distinct parts of a theological edifice that finds unity and coherence, its meaning and hermeneutical key, in the person and event of Jesus Christ, on which it is centred.¹⁴⁵

So too is Christology central to Dalit theology. The hermeneutic principle of liberation for Dalit theology is rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Indeed, it is in the pursuit of Dalit liberation that Jesus Christ has essential appeal for Dalit Christians. Dalit Christology is interpreted with the vision of liberation as a fundamental concern.

‘Christian’ identity thus becomes a significant identity for Dalit theologians, while not diminishing historical Dalit identity. Nirmal asserts: “We are not just dalits. We are Christian dalits. Something has happened to us. Our status has changed. Our Exodus from Hinduism – which was once imposed on us – to Christianity or rather to Jesus Christ is a valuable experience – a liberating experience.”¹⁴⁶ Indeed the Exodus to Jesus Christ is a movement from being a ‘no-people’ to being identified as ‘God’s people’ (Ephesians 2: 11-12).¹⁴⁷ Christology thus becomes the essential paradigm for liberating existence, involving a transformative movement from dehumanisation to humanisation.

¹⁴⁴ Dr. I. John Mohan Razu, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-36

¹⁴⁵ Jacques Dupuis, *Who Do You Say That I Am: An Introduction to Christology*, New York: Orbis Books, 1994, p. 2

¹⁴⁶ Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Dalit Christian Theology”, *Heuristic Explorations*, p. 148

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 156

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is an answer to the “unending cry of the oppressed, as the good news of liberation to the oppressed”.¹⁴⁸ Liberation is here understood in terms of justice and dignity in the face of oppression. Bishop M. Azariah observes that, “the central concern of the God of the Bible is for justice and righteousness to prevail among men and women.”¹⁴⁹ Thus Dalit theologians urged the Church to take the issue of justice seriously and be challenged by its own stance on the issue of caste. At the first National Conference in Delhi, Dalit theologians affirmed their commitment to struggle for human justice and equality,¹⁵⁰ seeking to become not only a ‘prophetic theology’ but also a,

[p]olitical theology for social action towards the transformation of unjust, undemocratic and oppressive structures. It is *doing theology* in community within the context of the sufferings and struggles of Dalits through dialogue, critical reflection and committed action for building a new life-order.¹⁵¹

The struggle of God in Jesus Christ is here understood as a struggle for the liberation of human existence from ‘whatever dehumanizes it.’¹⁵² The incarnated Christ did not simply assume humanity, but assumed humanity in order to ‘transform and redeem it.’¹⁵³

Dalit theology emerged as a significant movement in asserting the faith, consciousness and identity of Dalits in their ‘full humanity’, or as Nirmal suggests, in their ‘full divinity’, attaining the ‘glorious liberty’ that comes with being children of God.¹⁵⁴ Dalits, who were once perceived as ‘no-humans’ could now affirm boldly their identity as children created in the image of God.¹⁵⁵ Liberation is understood as a release from the forces that would continue to oppress and degrade Dalits in the world, allowing Dalits to proclaim their humanity, equality, dignity and life in fullness. This essentially includes life unburdened by injustice, inequality and socio-economic oppression. It is the human right of every individual, notes Kothapalli Wilson, to live in dignity

¹⁴⁸ Bishop V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCCK, 1997, p. 5

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, p. 223

¹⁵⁰ M.E. Prabhakar, *op. cit.*, p. 205

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211

¹⁵² K.P. Kuruvila, *op. cit.*, p. 194

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁵⁴ Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology”, A.P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 62

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

worthy of his or her humanity.¹⁵⁶ As such, Dalit theology provides no ‘escapism’ from the harsh realities of the world, but rather an essential engagement in the world for the humanization of Dalits.¹⁵⁷

5.1. The Incarnation of Christ

Dalit theologians assert the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as essential to the Dalit struggle for liberation. Although no systematic explication of the incarnation of Jesus has been developed by Dalit theologians,¹⁵⁸ the identification of Christ with the oppressed is a central hermeneutical principle for Dalit theology. The Bible thus becomes a key theological source for Dalit theologians,¹⁵⁹ offering a model which helps in the Dalit struggle against existential problems.¹⁶⁰ The Biblical narrative tells of a God actively involved within human history and in the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor.¹⁶¹ The solidarity of God with the oppressed was demonstrated by God’s act of liberation for the slaves of Egypt (Exodus 3:7-8),¹⁶² and most profoundly witnessed through the Incarnation of Christ. Here, God became a full part of human history, making a home among the people. An essential part of the Incarnation narrative for Dalits is that Jesus Christ came wrapped in swaddling clothes as one of the poorest of the poor, giving up his other worldly identity for the sake of the poor in the world.¹⁶³ Jesus became ‘Dalit’ in order to demonstrate God’s active solidarity with the poor and the oppressed,¹⁶⁴ allowing Dalits to

¹⁵⁶ Kothopalli Wilson, “A Dalit Theology of Human Self-Development”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 270

¹⁵⁷ K.P. Kuruvila, *op.cit.*, p. 188

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 176

¹⁵⁹ The Bible is a valuable possession of many Dalit homes, notes Devasahayam, and it is the process of theologizing through Bible studies that further understanding will emerge among Dalit communities. Bishop V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, p. 4

¹⁶⁰ James Massey, “Oppressed Communities and the Role of the Church”, *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies: Issue of Dalit Theology*, 2005, p. 16

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, p. 76. Exodus 3:7-8: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry on account of their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.”

¹⁶³ James Massey, “Oppressed Communities and the Role of the Church”, *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies: Issue of Dalit Theology*, Vol. XVI, No. 1&2, 2005, p. 17

¹⁶⁴ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India’s Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, p. p. 77

assert that Jesus is “in the midst of the liberation struggle of the dalits in India.”¹⁶⁵

Two Biblical narratives which verify the ‘dalitness’ of Jesus include Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus and the Samaritan at the well. In the first instance, Nicodemus seeks Jesus only at night-time (John 3: 1-21) for fear that he may be seen interacting with Jesus.¹⁶⁶ Just as a caste Indian could not approach a Dalit in public, so too did Nicodemus avoid Jesus until he could be sure of a discreet encounter. In the second instance Jesus interacts with a Samaritan at the well (John 4:1-45) despite her low social standing, and is therefore “deliberately baptized into the realm of the Dalit through his partaking of water from the common well and the common vessel of the Samaritan.”¹⁶⁷ Other New Testament instances which reflect Jesus’ Dalitness include, the genealogy of Jesus, highlighting the illegitimacy and intermixing of his blood line;¹⁶⁸ the eschatological sayings of Jesus, whereby Jesus speaks of facing rejection, mockery, suffering and death from the dominant religious tradition of the day; Jesus’ Nazareth Manifesto (Luke 4:16-30), whereby Jesus makes it clear that his message is for Dalits, and not for non-Dalits.¹⁶⁹

The Incarnation, notes Bishop Azariah, demonstrates that God sides with the powerless and the weak, and that Jesus’ ministry was for the victims of oppression and injustice.¹⁷⁰ Although Jesus would have preferred to be born in Herod’s palace, Azariah added, the fact that Jesus went straight from ‘heaven to the manger’ affirms his identification with the Dalits.¹⁷¹ Moving beyond the motif of Liberation theology which affirms God’s ‘preferential option for the poor’, Azariah affirms that the Dalits are the ‘direct option’ for God in Christ.¹⁷² A Seminar Statement on Dalit ideology affirmed that, “Jesus did not ‘opt’ for the

¹⁶⁵ Arvind Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 62

¹⁶⁶ Sathianathan Clarke, *op. cit.*, p. 30

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ This reflection has been criticised by Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, who writes: “When the names of women in Matthean genealogy are quoted with a note saying that all these four women (Rahab, Ruth, Tamar and Bathshebah) had murky pasts with regard to sexual relationships, in subscribing to the notion that something gets polluted through blood. The Caste ideology is so rooted in blood, descent and the ideology of purity and pollution that it is difficult to get out of this.” Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Wither Dalit Womanist Theology”, Samson Prabhakar & Jinkwan Kwon, eds. *Dalit and Minjung Theologies: A Dialogue*, Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2006, p. 36

¹⁶⁹ Arvind Nirmal, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-67

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in John C.B. Webster, *The Dalit Christians: A History*, p. 223

¹⁷¹ Interview, Bishop M. Azariah, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, 19th November, 2005

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

poor – he identified himself totally with the poor – He was the hungry one, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned – he was the dalit.”¹⁷³ The identification of God in Christ, and the recognition that Christ is present with Dalits in the midst of their struggles, brings hope for the existential renewal and transformation of life in the world. Nirmal writes:

It is thus the humanity of Christ that makes human ideological quest possible...It is when the Word becomes flesh and becomes a concrete historical existence that we can speak meaningfully of the incarnation...The Word, the Logos, the Idea becomes historically concrete so that it can transform human history and shape human destiny. And that, it seems to me, is the essential function of an authentic ideology. An authentic ideology therefore, is dynamic and no respecter of the *Status Quo*.¹⁷⁴

The identification and solidarity of Christ with the Dalit oppressed thus becomes a central hermeneutical principle for Dalit theology.

5.2. Sin

Dalit theology challenges classical notions of sin which focus on individual sin and individualistic notions of salvation.¹⁷⁵ The classical interpretation of sin, notes Devasahayam, lays emphasis primarily on the soul as oppose to the body, which has the effect of justifying and legitimizing the sufferings of the Dalits.¹⁷⁶ In other words, if redemption through Christ is merely concerned with an ‘other-worldly’ salvation, then the suffering and oppression in the physical world are of little consequence. Dalit theology seeks to assert the relevance of the worldly realm, interpreting liberation and salvation in terms of humanisation, including freedom from inequality, indignity and socio-economic oppression resulting from the caste system. Dalit theologians regard the caste system as ‘Satan’, standing in contradiction to the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ.¹⁷⁷ Sin is discernable within oppressive structures and reinforced through hegemonic caste consciousness which reinforces the Dalit status within Indian society.

¹⁷³ Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, p. 131

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124

¹⁷⁵ V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 55

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In this context Dalit theology names and condemns structural sin and calls for the dismantlement of oppressive caste consciousness which perpetuates the degraded condition of the Dalits.¹⁷⁸ Significantly this is not merely a call for social change, which could mask the underlying reality of sin. Despite Constitutional changes in post-Independent India, Kuldip Nayar argues that the government has done little to fight the root cause of oppression in India. While Untouchability has been banned, he notes, the caste system ‘whose product Untouchability is’ has not been banned,¹⁷⁹ perpetuating caste sin and the subjugation of Dalits. In the context of post-Independent society this sin is manifest through modern instruments of power which are nothing more than ‘subtle and invisible’ forms of continued caste hegemony.¹⁸⁰ For Devasahayam, there must be a dismantling of the ideologies that undergird the caste system, such as the theory of *karma* which asserts that Dalits themselves are responsible for their deprived condition.¹⁸¹ *Karma* has instilled in the hearts and minds of Dalits that their suffering is a result of sins committed in a previous life. As J. Waskom Pickett observed in his study of the mass conversion movements:

Much more devastating than physical oppression has been the psychological oppression inflicted by Hindu doctrines of karma and re-birth, which has taught them [Dalits] that they are a degraded, worthless people suffering just retribution for sins committed in earlier lives... The concepts which the Christian Gospel gives them of themselves and of God in relation to their sufferings and sins are worth incomparably more to them than any direct social or economic service the Church could render.¹⁸²

Within Dalit theological reflections on sin a dichotomy is created between the ‘sinners’ and the ‘sinned-against’. John C.B. Webster asserts that the Dalits, who suffer multiple oppressions, are the ‘sinned-against’ in India, resulting in serious interior struggles for Dalits.¹⁸³ Bishop Azariah and

¹⁷⁸ V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1992, p. 19

¹⁷⁹ Kuldip Nayar, quoted in Dr. I John Mohan Razu, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27

¹⁸⁰ Dr. K. Rajaratnam, “Rediscovering the Roots of Dalit Liberation: The Challenge Before the Indian Church”, *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies: Issue on Dalit Theology*, 2005, p. 9

¹⁸¹ V. Devasahayam, *op. cit.*, p. 19

¹⁸² J. Waskom Pickett, *Christ’s Way to the Indian Heart: Present Day Mass Movements to Christianity*, London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1938, p. 47-48

¹⁸³ John C. B. Webster, “Exploring the ‘Pastoral Theology’ Dimension of Dalit Liberation”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, 2004, p. 66

Devasahayam both affirm the theological category of sinned-against as justifiable for the Dalit context, whereby Dalits are considered the innocent victims of a sinful caste system.¹⁸⁴ The sin of the so-called righteous, Devasahayam observes, was to condemn the innocent Jesus as the accused.¹⁸⁵ Thus, he adds, it is the sinful that must acknowledge their sin and seek repentance.¹⁸⁶ Further, Bishop Azariah argues that the Dalits have ‘automatic’ forgiveness from sin due to God’s direct concern for and identification with them.¹⁸⁷ The dichotomous methodological framework adopted by first generation Dalit theologians thus leads to a dichotomous *theological* interpretation of sin. This position will be critically examined in subsequent dialogue with the theology of M.M. Thomas.

5.3. The Paradigm of the Cross

While Dalit theologians are yet to construct a theology of the Cross,¹⁸⁸ there is an implicit recognition of the inseparability of the incarnation and the Cross of Jesus.¹⁸⁹ It is on the Cross that Jesus’ Dalitness is profoundly observed: “On the Cross he was the broken, the crushed, the split, the torn, the driven – the Dalit, in the fullest possible etymological meaning of the term.¹⁹⁰ Bishop M. Azariah observes that Jesus did not hang on the Cross on behalf of the victim, but was himself an innocent victim, in solidarity with all other innocent victims of all times and places.¹⁹¹ Dalits know from the Cross that: “God has not remained at a safe distance from Dalit suffering... God has experienced in Jesus Christ, as Dalits experience, all the pain and agony of human suffering. This is a God who therefore understands from personal experience what human suffering feels

¹⁸⁴ Interview, Bishop M. Azariah, 19th November, 2005; Bishop V. Devasahayam, 21st November, 2005.

¹⁸⁵ Bishop V. Devasahayam, *op. cit.*, p. 57

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Conversation with Bishop M. Azariah, 21st November, 2005

¹⁸⁸ D.J. Prahakar, “A Liberationist Re-Interpretation of the Cross in Light of Dalit Experience of Suffering in Two Select Dalit Communities in Andhra Pradesh”, Unpublished M.Th. Dissertation submitted to the Senate of Serampore College, 2000, p. 85

¹⁸⁹ K.P. Kuruvila, *op. cit.*, p. 185

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Bishop M. Azariah, “The Church’s Healing Ministry to the Dalits”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*. p. 322

like”¹⁹² Nirmal supports this thesis, but adds that the Cross is where Jesus experienced the forsakenness of God, a forsakenness which is at the heart of the Dalit consciousness and experience.¹⁹³ In other words, God seems to be forsaken in the daily lives of the Dalits, where little evidence of God’s love, justice or presence is evident.¹⁹⁴ The God-forsakenness experienced by Jesus demonstrates for Nirmal that Jesus shares in the historical experience of the Dalits.

Traditional interpretations of the Cross, suggests Bishop Devasahayam, need to be revisited in order to enable a vision of the Cross that can strengthen Dalits in the struggle to appropriate for themselves the salvation wrought by Christ on the Cross.¹⁹⁵ Traditional theology portrays the Cross as predestined, with the divine Jesus playing his role to attain human salvation. Such an interpretation, Devasahayam continues, merely serves to devalue human potentiality and nullify Jesus’ significance for contemporary struggles in life.¹⁹⁶ Thus humans have been reduced to a position of ‘utter incapacity’, causing them to look for a saviour from ‘outside’ and ‘possibly heaven’.¹⁹⁷ Rather, Jesus must be recognized as representing the ‘oppressed collective’, one who anticipated his death because of the confrontational path he chose to follow. Jesus went to Jerusalem to win over the Jews for the Kingdom of God and it was here that he was arrested and crucified. There would be no turning back from this vocation, and through his ‘overarching commitment to humanity’ the Cross could be interpreted as a human choice.¹⁹⁸ The example of Jesus on the Cross therefore inspires Dalits not to seek a saviour from outside themselves, but to reclaim their human potentiality and strive to achieve the goal of liberation for themselves.

The identity and suffering of Christ in solidarity with the innocent victims of society, and his commitment to stand for humanity against the oppressive structures of the world, ensures that the Cross stands as a central paradigm for Dalit theological praxis and reflection. God’s struggle in Jesus is to “liberate history and human existence from its inhumanity...The suffering of Jesus on the

¹⁹² John C.B. Webster, “Exploring the ‘Pastoral Theology’ Dimension of Dalit Liberation”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, No. 2&3, 2004, p. 69

¹⁹³ Arvind Nirmal, *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1990, p. 155

¹⁹⁴ K.P. Kuruvila, *op.cit.*, p. 186

¹⁹⁵ Bishop V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Madras: ISPCK, 1997, p. 53

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55; K.P. Kuruvila, *op.cit.*, p. 185

Cross sought to free the people from their inhuman suffrage in order to expose and oppose the dominant structures of society.”¹⁹⁹

5.4. Resurrection

Just as the Incarnation cannot be separated from the Cross, neither can the Cross be separated from the Resurrection.²⁰⁰ It is the resurrected Jesus, notes Kuruvila, which provides hope for a bright future for the Dalits in their daily living:

With resurrection, Jesus transcended all marginality. He broke the bonds of every cultural, racial, religious, sexual, economic, social or regional bias that marginalized him and eventually led him to the cross. No Christian faith is possible in India today without the identification with the oppressed and commitment to their resurrection from their tombs in which they are held, guarded by the musclemen of the ruling classes, according to the law and otherwise.²⁰¹

Resurrection thus becomes an essential paradigm of hope within Dalit theology for the liberation of all Dalits. It is interpreted with primary relevance to existential liberation from worldly oppression, thus working towards the transformation of society. Of all theologies, notes Bishop Devasahayam, Dalit theology is the most ‘doxological’ because it clearly describes the wonderful deeds of the Lord in leading the Christian Dalits through an experience of death to life, and from being a no-people to being God’s people.²⁰² It is this experience which allows the Christian Dalits to affirm boldly that “the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion”.²⁰³

The Resurrection thus becomes a central theological paradigm inextricably linked to the Dalit struggle for ‘humanness’, including dignity and fullness of life in the socio-economic and political realm of Indian life. The vision of Dalit theology is concerned essentially with the transformation of Indian society in which Dalits may have fullness of life. Significantly, however, James Massey argues that in working towards the transformation of society Dalit

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 194

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 189

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² Bishop V. Devasahayam, *op. cit.*, p. 65

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

liberation must ultimately include the liberation of the oppressors.²⁰⁴ Massey urges Dalits not to aspire to be like their oppressors, seeking recognition only within the oppressive system as it stands, for example through the process of sanskritization. Such aspirations, he argues, will result in Dalits losing their 'humanness a second time.'²⁰⁵ Rather the Dalits must free themselves in their own consciousness so that they may in turn free their oppressive captors.²⁰⁶ Dalit theology, centred on the redemptive event of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, thus becomes a transformative theological instrument in the creation of a just Indian society.²⁰⁷ This is a significant point, for at the heart of Dalit theology is the pursuit of reconciliation with the oppressors. Although concern is primarily focussed on the liberation of Dalits, the ultimate vision extends beyond exclusive Dalit concerns towards a reconciled Indian society.

This vision means that Dalit theology is challenged from within, demanding that a tension exist between Dalit concerns and the quest for wider reconciliation. This dialectic exposes Dalit exclusivism as problematic if it loses sight of its wider goal of reconciled community. Here the paradigm of New Humanity in Christ becomes central to the Dalit theological quest for transformed and reconciled society. This essential Christological paradigm will be examined in chapter V, highlighting the Dalit vision for existential transformation as a necessary part of the quest for humanisation. The resurrection of Christ becomes central to this vision, providing an assurance of transcendence from marginality, literally resurrecting Dalits from their 'tombs' in order to participate in a transformed and just society.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter I provided an essential overview of Dalit and Dalit Christian identity in the caste-class-power nexus of India. While caste remains the determining factor for Dalit identity and oppression, class and power have also been identified as key concepts of Dalit concern. The reality of Dalit

²⁰⁴ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, p. 100

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ James Massey, "Vision and Role of Dalit Theology", James Massey and S. Lourduwamy, *A Theology from Dalit Perspective*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2001, p. 79

injustice, indignity and powerlessness drive the Dalit theological quest for existential liberation of all Dalits. Thus Dalit theology seeks a theological and Christological paradigm which maintains the essential link between Dalits and Dalit Christians, while at the same time working towards the transformation of society in which Dalits may live in fullness of humanity. This chapter served to highlight key theological and Christological elements on which the contribution of M.M. Thomas may subsequently be assessed, including the Dalit quest for humanisation, justice and dignity within the Indian context. Prior to engaging in a critical discourse between M.M. Thomas and first generation Dalit theologians, the following chapter provides an essential overview of Thomas's theology.

Chapter II: The Theology of M.M. Thomas

1. Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of M.M. Thomas's theology, establishing an essential foundation on which critical discourse with Dalit theology is built in subsequent chapters. Following an introduction to M.M. Thomas, I begin by assessing Arvind Nirmal's claim that Thomas was an exponent of *karma mārga*, and thus an elite Indian Christian theologian irrelevant for Dalit theology. By arguing against Nirmal's classification, the path is opened for critical assessment of Thomas's contributory relevance for emerging Dalit theology. This includes an attempt to locate Thomas's theology essentially within the broad theological paradigm of creation-fall-redemption-consummation, centred on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Within this broad theological framework, it is argued that Thomas's interpretation of New Humanity in Christ urges the creative participation of humanity towards the transformation of society on the principles of humanisation and justice.

2. M.M. Thomas

Madathiparampil Mammen Thomas was born into a middle-class Syrian Christian family on 15 May, 1916, at Kavungumrayay in central Kerala.¹ He would become one of the great ecumenical theologians of the twentieth century, deeply concerned that the Christian Gospel would have a 'challenging relevance'² to the people struggling for justice and dignity in the midst of modern India. Following his early involvement in the Indian Student Christian Movement and World Student

¹ T.M. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, Madras: CLS, 1986, p. 1

² 'Challenging Relevance' was a term used by A.G. Hogg in *The Christian Message to the Hindu*, Duff Missionary Lectures, 1945. London: SCM. Press, 1947

Christian Fellowship,³ M.M. Thomas became a member of the Asian working committee for the World Council of Churches programme “The Common Christian Responsibility towards Areas of Rapid Social Change” (1955). In 1957 the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS) was founded under the leadership of Paul Devanandan to study modern religious and secular movements of India. Following the death of Devanandan, Thomas became Director of CISRS (1961-1976), becoming “the architect and main thinker of Indian Christian social thought during the last decades.”⁴ In 1962 Thomas chaired the World Council of Churches (WCC) working committee of Church and Society and in 1966 the Geneva conference on ‘Christians in the Technical and Social Revolutions of Our Time.’⁵ In 1968, while attending the WCC fourth Assembly at Uppsala as a delegate from the Mar Thoma Church, Thomas became the first non-westerner and lay person to be elected Chair of the WCC central committee, fulfilling this role at the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi, 1975.⁶ In 1990 Thomas was appointed Governor of Nagaland, although after two years the Indian government sought his resignation for encouraging the people to develop their “own views on their social and cultural future rather than acting as a pliant tool of the central government in New Delhi.”⁷ M.M. Thomas, prolific writer and theologian, died on December 3, 1996, a “father figure to numerous subaltern movements and social action groups.”⁸ Robin Boyd notes that Thomas was a man, “deeply and intelligently committed to Christ, to the Church, to social and political justice, to Christian unity, and ultimately to the unity of the whole human race.”⁹

³ See, Robin Boyd, *The Witness of the Student Christian Movement: Church Ahead of the Church*, London: SPCK, 2007

⁴ Godwin Shiri, quoted in T. Jacob Thomas, *Ethics of a World Community: Contribution of M.M. Thomas*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993, p. 39

⁵ Paul Abrecht, “M.M. Thomas and Paulos Mar Gregorios”, Jesudas M. Athyal, ed. *M.M. Thomas: The Man and His Legacy*, Kerala: The Tiruvalla Ecumenical Charitable Trust, 1997, p. 21

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22

⁷ *Ibid.* Selected addresses and writings by M.M. Thomas during his time as Governor of Nagaland can be found in M.M. Thomas, *Nagas Towards A.D. 2000*, Madras: Centre for Research on New International Economic Order, 1992

⁸ Bishop Poulouse Mar Poulouse, Foreword, Jesudas M. Athyal, *op. cit.*

⁹ Robin Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 90

2.1 M.M. Thomas's theology: A karma mārga?

In his pioneer speech in Bangalore, Arvind P. Nirmal called for the emergence of a 'counter theology' to Brahminical Indian Christian theology in order to represent to the voice and experience of Dalit Christians.¹⁰ A dichotomy within the theological realm of India was thus established, setting Dalit theology against Indian Christian theology. Within this dichotomy, Nirmal effectively categorised M.M. Thomas as an Indian Christian thinker influenced by the Brahminic tradition. In his oft quoted passage calling for a counter theology to emerge, Nirmal writes:

To speak in terms of the traditional Indian categories, Indian Christian Theology, following the Brahminical tradition, has trodden the *jnana marga*, the *bhakti marga* and the *karma marga*... In M.M. Thomas we have a theologian who has contributed to theological anthropology at the international level and who laid the foundations for a more active theological involvement in India – the *karma marga*.¹¹

Thomas was thus classified as an Indian Christian theologian who worked on behalf of the elite,¹² considered more of a foe than an ally to Dalit theology. In other words, the categorization of M.M. Thomas as an exponent of *karma mārga* within a dichotomous methodology effectively dismissed Thomas's theology as irrelevant for Dalit theology. This may in part explain why there is only scant mention of M.M. Thomas in the writing of first generation Dalit theologians. Yet if it can be shown that Nirmal's assessment of Thomas is inadequate, this offers legitimate and important grounds for this thesis, which argues that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology. In this section I question the validity of Nirmal's classification of Thomas as an exponent of *karma mārga*.

In the Introduction, caution was raised against Nirmal's dichotomous classification of theologians. It is argued here that such a classification fails to adequately locate the theology of M.M. Thomas. While it is clear that Thomas was

¹⁰ Arvind P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology", *Heuristic Explorations*, Madras: CLS, 1991, p. 144

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 139-140

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 139

well versed and influenced by the contributions of Indian Christian theologians,¹³ his theological concern was not in relating the Christian message to classical expressions of Hindu religion and philosophy, but rather to nascent patterns of Hindu religious expression and the secular ideologies emerging in modern India. The theological endeavours and reflections of Indian theologians such as Paul Devanandan and M.M. Thomas reflect a theological approach distinct from the prevalent Indian Christian theological tradition. In this respect the clear cut dichotomy suggested by Nirmal blurs under closer scrutiny.

The term *mārga* is a Sanskrit term used within the Hindu tradition to refer to a 'path' or way of salvation. In the Hindu tradition there are commonly three such paths to salvation, the *jnāna mārga*, or path of knowledge, the *bhakti mārga*, or path of devotion, and the *karma mārga*, known as the path of action.¹⁴ Nirmal had argued that because Indian Christian theology had trodden these three paths of the Brahminic tradition, Dalit theology must develop as a counter theology.¹⁵ Significantly, however, *karma mārga* is a path towards union with God, relating to action in the world in order to attain liberation.¹⁶ Certainly if we were to determine which of the Hindu *mārgas* comes closest to Thomas's thought, the answer would be the *karma mārga*. While Thomas affirms the significance of Christian-Hindu dialogue at the level of mystical spiritual interiority, as pursued by Swami Abishiktananda,¹⁷ he is critical of this approach if it leads to "the exclusion of all bodily and social exteriority, and a concentration on the eternal Christ to the exclusion of the historical Jesus."¹⁸ Thomas considered 'humanism' and not 'divinism' to be the most appropriate theological meeting point between Christianity

¹³ M.M. Thomas & P.T. Thomas, *Towards an Indian Christian Theology: Life and Thought of some pioneers*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 1998.

¹⁴ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan & Charles A. Moore, Ed. *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989, pp. 101-2, 111-119, 143-145. Hans Küng, *Christianity and World Religions*, trans. Peter Heinegg, London: Collins, 1987, pp. 219-224

¹⁵ A.P. Nirmal, *op. cit.*, p. 139

¹⁶ The roots of *karma mārga* can be traced to the conversation between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā: ch. 1-3. See Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan & Charles A. Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 102 & 111-116. See also, Ainslie T. Embree, ed. *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Second Edition, Vol. 1, Viking: Penguin Books India, 1991, pp. 276-287

¹⁷ Swami Abishiktananda, *Hindu-Christian Meeting Point: Within the Cave of the Heart*. Bombay: The Institute of Indian Culture, 1969

¹⁸ A.M. Mundanan, *Paths of Indian Theology*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1998, p. 212

and Hinduism, and sought to relate theology to responsible action within the context of the world towards humanisation and social transformation.¹⁹

Boyd correctly notes that Thomas's interest was in the Christian and Hindu meeting together "in the context of modern, secular India in order to find common fields of action and service for the good of the nation as a whole and of individual 'persons'."²⁰ In this light, M.M. Thomas appreciated the contribution of Rammohan Roy and Gandhi, who were concerned with the moral regeneration of Indian society, and Swami Vivekananda, who sought to demonstrate how Hinduism could take seriously the human values to which modern India was awakening.²¹ Commenting on these Indian thinkers, Thomas writes: "Though from different angles, one from the social and one from the spiritual, both types of Neo-Hindus are dealing with the question of the relation between man's ultimate spiritual destiny and the regeneration of human society in modern Indian history."²² Yet while positively affirming the quest of Neo-Hindu thinkers to relate spirituality to the regeneration of Indian society, Thomas viewed redemption in Christ to be the source of such transformation. The significance of this difference cannot be underestimated.

Given Thomas's desire to essentially relate faith and action, Boyd investigates the possibility of describing Thomas's approach as an 'enriched *karma mārṅa*', recognising his endeavour to seek a path of 'loving, self-sacrificing service.'²³ While this is done positively, in order to assess the possibility of formulating a 'Christian *karma mārṅa*', Boyd argues, significantly, that essential 'differences' must be considered.²⁴ Noting Thomas's desire for the Church in India to reconstruct Gandhian ethical insights within the framework of its doctrine of redemption in Christ, Boyd crucially identifies the difficulty in making an uncritical and unqualified identification of M.M. Thomas with *karma mārṅa*.²⁵ Rather than

¹⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Madras: CLS, 1971, pp. 35-36

²⁰ Robin Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 2nd Edition, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, p. 312

²¹ M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Robin Boyd, *op. cit.*, p. 314

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 330

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 316-7

affirm a path to salvation, M.M. Thomas regarded action as a path of *witness to the salvation offered in Christ*. Thomas writes:

We may find what is said on thinking, emotion, and action as parallel to the paths of Jnana, Bhakti, and Karma in Hinduism. But these understandings in Christianity and Hinduism have radical difference. In Christianity the only one path to God's presence is Christ; that means faith in Christ. Knowledge, devotion and action are means of expressing this faith in Christ; they are not paths in themselves to reach God.²⁶

Here Thomas makes a fundamental distinction between the Hindu *mārgas* and the Christian path in Christ. While Thomas affirms the necessity of faith seeking responsible action, this is merely an *expression* of faith in Christ and not a path in itself towards salvation. The *karma mārga*, as a path in itself, thus differs essentially from Thomas's understanding of Christ.

Nirmal's classification of Thomas as an exponent of *karma mārga* fails, therefore, to appreciate Thomas's understanding of social action in relation to salvation and humanisation in Christ. Certainly Thomas objects to any form of human works or law as a path towards self-redemption, believing that transformation of community through action comes as a result of forgiveness of sin and divine Grace through Christ:

The Cross is the justification of sinful life and action through Divine forgiveness. This faith can liberate the political and social workers and the political and social movements from endless attempts at self-justification...The Christian doctrine of justification by faith in the Grace of God through Christ and not the works is of tremendous relevance to the transfiguration of politics and radical social change.²⁷

The Hindu *karma mārga* does not acknowledge the reality of the power of sin and the tragic depths of human action requiring forgiveness through the Cross, and thus

²⁶ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *Spiritual Body*, Contextual Theological Bible Commentary; 1 Corinthians, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2005, p. 36

²⁷ M.M. Thomas, "Communication of the Gospel in the Context of India's Struggle for a New society", 1976, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

fundamentally differs from Thomas's theological position. Only divine forgiveness, and not greater moral principles or moral law, can be the answer to sin.²⁸

It is clear that Nirmal did not seek to classify M.M. Thomas as a theological exponent of *karma mārga* in order to assess the positive fruits that may be born from such an investigation, as attempted by Boyd. Rather, Nirmal categorized M.M. Thomas from within a rigid methodological framework in order to exclude Thomas's contribution as irrelevant for Dalit theology. While whole-heartedly agreeing with the call of Nirmal for Dalits to participate in a theological realm which had been denied them, one may justifiably question the dichotomous methodology which so easily dismissed the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas. Indeed, arguing against Nirmal's assessment of Thomas, the path is opened to assess the relevance of M.M. Thomas's theological contribution for emerging Dalit theology.

2.2. Theology of M.M. Thomas

This section offers an overview of M.M. Thomas's theology. Although Thomas himself warned against attempts to 'systematize an unsystematic body of writings',²⁹ this overview provides a necessary outline of Thomas theology. The writings of M.M. Thomas are prolific and diverse, and shifts in his thought can clearly be identified, as noted ably by T.M. Philip.³⁰ Thomas was confident that no final system of theology could adequately define the relation between God, Christ, humanity, the Church and the world.³¹ His theological journey was an attempt to understand the changing context in which he lived *in light of the Gospel*, and to

²⁸ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM Press, 1969, pp. 235-6

²⁹ Handwritten comments made by M.M. Thomas in the dissertation of Stanley Sumithra, "Theology of Mission in Indian Context: A Study of Madathilaparamil Mammen Thomas", Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the Eberhard Karls University, Tübingen, 1981

³⁰ T.M. Philip identifies three significant but inter-related phases in the development of Thomas' theology: (a) the liberal phase; (b) the Neo-Orthodox phase; (c) a Post-Kraemer Approach. See, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, pp. 19-30

³¹ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 62

understand the Gospel *in light of the context* he lived. Thus Thomas's theology was open to challenge and change in the midst of a dynamic Indian context.

Yet it is possible to identify in Thomas's writing a core theological framework in which dynamic engagement with the shifting context takes place. While there is flexibility within this framework, allowing for essential adaptability as a result of such engagement, the paradigmatic framework itself remains fixed. The overriding framework of Thomas's theology is located in the paradigm of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. The paradigmatic centre of Thomas's theological framework is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel, he writes, "is what God has done for the salvation of humankind through the life, death on the cross, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus of Nazareth."³² Thus, *Christology* becomes the dynamic centre of Thomas's theology. For Thomas, the past, present and future are essentially bound together in Christ.³³ Indeed, K.P. Kuruvila correctly acknowledges that in Thomas's theology, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the whole Christ-event.³⁴ Thomas's theological assertion of New Humanity in Christ, which envisions the possibility of individual and social transformation that is central to Dalit theology, stems from Thomas's Christological interpretation of the Cross and Resurrection within the broader framework of creation-fall-redemption-consummation.

The following section identifies key theological elements which together establish a broader picture of Thomas's theology, necessary for providing a theological basis on which the research thesis can be assessed in discussion with Dalit theologians.

³² M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *To the Ends of the Earth*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2005, p. 35

³³ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 61

³⁴ K.P. Kuruvila, *The Word Became Flesh: A Christological Paradigm for Doing Theology in India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2002, p. 48. Based on Col. 1:15-17; John 1:1-14, Thomas writes that from the beginning of creation, the "kingdom of love offered to the entire world in Jesus Christ was hidden inside (latent in) the universe and in human history, from the beginning, as the ultimate goal of the evolutionary process of the universe and of the historical forces, and also as directing it." M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *The First-Born of All Creation*, Contextual Theological Bible Study on the Book of Colossians & Philemon, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 18

2.3. Loving Fellowship with God

The love of God lies at the heart of Thomas's theology and Christological reflection, running as the central and constant stream through the paradigm of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. God's love is expressed in the creation of the world, and it was for love that God sent Christ to the world to redeem the world from sin. Building upon the theological foundation of God's love, Thomas considers the human person to be created by God for loving relationship. He writes: "God created the Universe that He might share His life with many who would be His children. It was for God's fellowship that man was made, for, sharing in fellowship, is the very essence of true love."³⁵ Indeed Thomas suggests that God is "restless without man, moving towards us – through all his creation" in a bid to be in fellowship with humanity.³⁶ Thomas is not primarily interested in what he terms the "speculative metaphysical question of the 'essential being' of God as He is in Himself, or the 'Nature' of the person of Jesus."³⁷ Rather, he considers the primary concern of the Bible to be, "what God is in relation to man and in Jesus as God's revelation to men, and as God's deed for the redemption of mankind and human history."³⁸ Thus *relationship* of God to humankind and, consequently, the *redemption* of humankind become central to Thomas's theology. Rooted in divine love, "God's purpose is to create a family of men and women who reflect the glory of the true humanity that lives in him alone."³⁹

The essence of true human being and personality, notes Thomas, is rooted in divine relationship, expressed in communion with God.⁴⁰ God desires to be in relationship with humankind and is like the prodigal's father, waiting anxiously to be re-united in fellowship with the son. God is like the woman searching for the lost

³⁵ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, Madras: CLS, 1972, p. 4

³⁶ M.M. Thomas adds that as God is restless without humanity, so too is humanity restless without God, finding rest in God through God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. *Ibid.*, p. 31

³⁷ M.M. Thomas, "What Think Ye of Christ", Unpublished Bible Study delivered at the Mar Thoma Student Conference, 1970, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, p. 3

⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, "The Human Person", *Ideological Quest Within Christian Commitment: 1939-1954*, Madras: CLS, 1983, p. 111

coin, and like the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep.⁴¹ And when the sheep is found: “How delighted he is then! He lifts it on his shoulders, and home he goes to call his friends and neighbours together. ‘Rejoice with me!’ he cries.”⁴² Thomas thus interprets the incarnation of Jesus in light of God’s search for a dwelling place with humanity.

2.4. Human Fellowship

God created humanity to be in relationship with one another in community: “It is as we realize our relationship with our heavenly Father that we realize our oneness with all humanity. As we rejoice in our sonship, we realize our true relationship with all men, at all times and in all places.”⁴³ As Creator, God addresses the finite human as ‘Thou’, and the person enters into ‘communion with God’ and ‘community with neighbour’.⁴⁴ Thomas writes:

Two facts about man are proclaimed by the doctrine of creation. First, that the creative Will of God is the ground of man’s essential being; second, that his being expresses itself in love, which is spontaneous mutuality. In other words, the end of man is communion with God and community with neighbour... We are by our nature a people of God. It means that worship and obedience to God, and reverence of and community with neighbour are correlatives of personality, and are the very essence of personal being.⁴⁵

Thus, the essence of being human is to be in relationship to God and neighbour within the community.⁴⁶ Yet the reality of sin and self-righteousness leads the human to rebel against God, thus becoming alienated from self and alienated from true community with neighbour.⁴⁷ The distortion of relationship finds ultimate

⁴¹ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, 6

⁴² *Ibid.*, Luke 15:3-6

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 39

⁴⁴ M.M. Thomas, “Towards a Social Philosophy”, *Student Outlook*, Feb-March Edition, 1946

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Towards a Christian Social Philosophy”, *Student Outlook*, Feb-March Edition, 1946. Thomas makes a necessary distinction between the ‘individual’ and ‘community’, opposing both radical individualism and collectivism. The two are held in necessary tension through his concept of *person-in community*. See, T.M. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, pp. 41-42

⁴⁷ M.M. Thomas, “Man in Society-A Christian View”, *Religion and Society*, 1960, pp. 55-56

reconciliation in the Cross and resurrection of Christ, viewed by Thomas as the ‘focal point of the divine-human relationship’.⁴⁸

2.5. Human creativity

It is clear from the Creation covenant, notes Thomas, that God bestowed on humankind ‘a share in the divine creativity’, affording humanity the power and responsibility to “cooperate with God in the continuance of the creation.”⁴⁹ Humans were created by God to multiply, till the ground and make tools sufficient to produce food and other necessities in order to sustain the community of life on earth.⁵⁰ The transformation of nature through labour and stewardship are considered essential aspects of intrinsic human vocation.⁵¹ Thomas writes: “One may say that human creativity directed to world development including working of nature, building new tools, planning new societies, belongs to the essence of human freedom implanted in humanity as the ‘image of God.’”⁵² The human vocation towards creative development and transformation in line with divine purpose for human relationship in community is thus considered a necessary part of human personality. Thus to deny participation in creativity and transformation is to deny the essence of divinely created personality.

Although sin perverted the human task of creativity and development, distorting the divine-human relationship and bringing strife and chaos to the world,⁵³ neither the human revolt against God, nor God’s judgment, took away the human endowment towards creativity. Rather, sin introduced the potential for exploitation and destruction leading to the disintegration of society:

When sin did not destroy creativity, the murderous spirit of Cain,
and the revengeful self-aggressive spirit of Lamech entered all

⁴⁸ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *The First-Born of All Creation*, p. 16

⁴⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The Living God”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia: Twenty five Selected Sermons/Homilies* Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, p. 77

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement”, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today’s Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore College, 1994, p. 42

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ M.M. Thomas, “The Living God”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 77

Developmental creativity making them morally ambiguous and misdirecting to serve purposes of exploitation and oppression rather than humanness. This is the tragedy of the developmental creativity in human history...Human creativity becomes a destructive force and brings disintegration to community as judgment of God.⁵⁴

Thus, human creativity is not lost as a result of sin. Rather, sin enters into the creative process as a 'destructive force' bringing 'disintegration to community'. This is an essential point in the development of Thomas's theology as he moves beyond an early resonance with liberal theology.⁵⁵ There is a tension between the creative capacity of humanity to work in accordance with the creative purpose of God in building true human community in Christ, and the continued disintegration of community as a result of sin. Significantly, however, the creative capacity for transformation of society is present as part of the true essence of being human in Christ.

2.6. Individual sin

M.M. Thomas's understanding of sin is an essential component of his theological and Christological reflections. The title of an early work, *Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy*, written in 1943, denotes Thomas's post-Enlightenment stance on the concept of human nature. Although Thomas will eventually move beyond this work, emphasising the power of the Cross for transformation *beyond* judgment, these early reflections are worth noting. Thomas asks:

Man and society have their origin in the creative act of God. Therefore Jesus Christ the Incarnate God is the reality of every man, and the community of Grace is the reality of society. But does society fail to realize its destiny? Should it fail? Can we not

⁵⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", p. 43

⁵⁵ See, T.M. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology: An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, pp. 19-22

build up a society which is the Kingdom of God? Why can't we if we ought? These questions need careful examination.⁵⁶

Here Thomas's interpretation of sin relates both to the human individual and, significantly, to the building of society in accordance with the community of grace offered in Christ. Influenced by the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Nicholas Berdyaev, and C.H. Dodd, Thomas notes: "I was primarily interested in the theological interpretation of the loss of humanity in liberal individualism and totalitarian collective societies the meaning of true community and in that light, the Christian approach to Indian national ideologies, culture and politics."⁵⁷ Thomas thus sought to understand the personal dimension of human existence in relation to the broader community of persons, a factor he considered particularly relevant to the Indian quest for post-Independence nation building.⁵⁸ Here we detect the seeds of Thomas's attempt to maintain in essential tension the person in community through the paradigm of *koinonia*-in-Christ, a paradigm which will subsequently be identified as significant for emerging Dalit theology.

With Enlightenment faith in the inherent goodness of humanity waning, given the tragedy of two World Wars, M.M. Thomas acknowledges the influence of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, who "came to see deep down in man's sub-conscious a principle of self-contradiction which disintegrates him and leads him and his civilization to death".⁵⁹ The realization of the "dark abyss within the depths of human personality", notes Thomas, turned Christianity away from its liberal humanist tendencies, towards a re-acceptance of the Christian doctrine of Original sin.⁶⁰ Thomas's interpretation of the original sin is worth quoting at length:

It was a desire to be like God that led to the fall of Adam and Eve. Man knew he was not the maker of the universe and the master of his destiny; that he was helpless without God, dependent on God, finite and a creature. But man wanted to be like God – self-

⁵⁶ M.M. Thomas, "Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy", T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, p. 19

⁵⁷ M.M. Thomas, "Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility", Unpublished Autobiography, UTC Archives, Bangalore, p. 25

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy", pp. 19-20

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22

sufficient, independent, and infinite; he wanted to be the Creator, the centre round which the whole universe revolved. And it was this rebellion of man against his own finite creature-hood – this anxiety to be self-sufficient and independent – in other words to be God, to have the world revolving round his self at its centre – it was this spiritual pride that marred the divine image that he was. This then is original sin – man’s declaration of independence of God or man’s desire to become God; his denial of the Lordship of God; making his own goodness ultimate – this is the original sin of man.⁶¹

M. M. Thomas interprets sin to be the rebellion of the finite human self from God. The ‘original’ sin of the human is the refusal of the spirit to acknowledge the sovereignty of God, worshipping self rather than God.⁶² Alienation from the true essence of being in relationship to God leads to alienation from the true self.

Here Thomas interprets sin in individualistic terms, although his concern has significant implications for the wider community. The first is the tendency to make ‘absolute’ the partial community, such as caste, race or nation.⁶³ The second is the effect that sin has on relationship to neighbour. For Thomas, when the human assumes the role of God, so too does he assume the role of God over neighbour.⁶⁴ Instead of reverence for the mystery of the other, the other becomes an object for exploitation in the vain hope of self-grandeur and self-justification, causing inevitable conflict and division, enemy and slave.⁶⁵ He writes:

A conflict is set up within man between his asserted independence and the awareness of the reality of his dependence. And he tries to resolve this intolerable tension by trying to forget this dependence by changing relationships with his neighbours; he imposes himself as a god over them. Instead of ‘meeting’ them in reverence, he seeks to ‘absorb or use’ them.⁶⁶

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23

⁶² M.M. Thomas, “Man in Society – A Christian View”, *Religion and Society*, 1960, p. 55

⁶³ M.M. Thomas, Sermon, April 13, 1969. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, M.M. Thomas, “Man in Society – A Christian View”, p. 55

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Ideological Quest Within Christian Commitment: 1939-54*, Madras: CLS, 1983, pp. 107-126

The reality of sin thus has direct consequences for human relationship. Alienation of self leads to alienation from neighbour, leading to the disintegration of human community.

There is no Pelagian optimism for Thomas in the capacity of humanity to act in obedience to the will of God. The self-righteousness of the human, in accordance with St. Paul, prevents the human from doing the good intended.⁶⁷ The world cannot realize its true being without the redemptive power of Christ. All human attempts for righteousness will be unsuccessful.⁶⁸ Influenced by C.H. Dodd, Thomas notes that at the time of Christ, there were plenty of human movements striving for 'good': The Jewish nationalist movement produced the 'finest flower of Jewish heroism' and was a great movement for human freedom; the Jewish religion and law produced their 'finest flower in the Pharisee', standing upright for moral law and ethical righteousness; Imperial Rome sought peace and unity, law and order, in a bid to unite the world.⁶⁹ Thomas writes of these movements: "The best achievements of man in Church and State, in politics and religion – these three, the great forces of good and righteousness in the ancient world – they crucified Christ...herein is original sin revealed – as a principle of contradiction, as pride, that turns every human righteousness into its very opposite."⁷⁰ Sin does not mean the absence of 'goodness', but rather the infection of the good by the spirit of self-sufficiency.⁷¹ There can therefore be no division between the good and the evil, just and unjust, for all fall under the grace of God in Christ.⁷² Thomas writes in reference to this inner contradiction: "The devil is not the brute in man, as we sometimes think; the devil is always the proud angel in man."⁷³ In light of this reality M.M. Thomas cautions against the sinful tendency present in the midst of liberating movements seeking justice. He writes:

⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formation of a True Secular Humanism", *Student World*, Geneva: WSF, 2nd Quarter, 1953, p. 137

⁶⁸ M.M. Thomas, Sermon, April 13, 1969. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁶⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy", p. 24

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ M.M. Thomas, M.M. Thomas, "Man in Society – A Christian View", p. 56

⁷² M.M. Thomas, "The Totalitarianism of the Church", Lecture series under the title, *The Church and the World*, delivered in Madurai at the SCM Regional Leaders Conference, December, 1945. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁷³ M.M. Thomas, "Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy", p. 23

All liberation movements are prone to collective self-justification and self-righteousness and is likely to end in seeing itself as the Messiah or Saviour; the self-idolatry becomes the source of a new oppression...Here the gospel of forgiveness or justification by faith has great relevance to collective liberation movements, in moulding their spirituality for struggle, liberating the liberal movements from becoming self-righteous.⁷⁴

The Cross of Christ, for Thomas, becomes the central paradigm for overcoming the sinful tendency to self-righteousness, and thus essentially relevant to the pluralistic religio-secular context of India.

2.7. Corporate sin

M.M. Thomas affirms the 1975 World Council of Churches Report on 'Structures of Injustice and Struggles for Liberation', acknowledging that evil works not only through the individual person but also through the "exploitative social structures which humiliate [hu]mankind".⁷⁵ Thomas writes: "Today, more than ever before, we have become aware that the corporate structures of oppression and injustice have behind them the support and sanction of demonic spirits of idolatry of creatures of race, nation and class, absolutised by human worship."⁷⁶ While sin has a consequence for the human individual, the liberating power of God in Christ must, according to Thomas, transform not only the person but also the oppressive structures of society, demanding a struggle for economic justice and political freedom in the context of human existence.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, p. 53. Elsewhere Thomas writes: "People who believe that their cause is a righteous cause, their programme is a holy crusade, such are the people who do greatest violence to human personality...If we read history we would be horrified more at the cruelties perpetuated by self-righteous moral men for what they considered righteous causes...We are simply staggered at the tyranny of men and nations who have surrendered themselves heart and soul frantically to good causes, programmes and ideals. The man or the nation, or class or race conscious of a mission to the world can and is a demon if he is not conscious of his sinfulness." See, M.M. Thomas, "The Totalitarianism of the Church", Second lecture in a series entitled *The Church and the World*, presented at the SCM Regional Leaders Conference, Madurai, 1945. Unpublished manuscript notes, UTC, Bangalore.

⁷⁵ Quoted in, M.M. Thomas *et al.*, "Caste, Class and Power Structures", Editorial, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, September, 1974, p. 4

⁷⁶ M.M. Thomas, "The Search for a New Spirituality", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, March, 1978, pp. 3-4

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

M.M. Thomas admits that during his early student days, following a deep evangelical experience of conversion in his personal life, he was indifferent to the social evils present around him.⁷⁸ Influenced by Jawaharlal Nehru, Karl Marx and Mahatma Gandhi, however, Thomas began to be awakened to the reality of evil structural forces. Although Nehru was a secular humanist, he had often used the term ‘demonic’ in reference to the caste system. Marx saw in the economic system a built-in power of alienation responsible for the reality of poverty and oppression in India, a fetish system perceived by the people to be mysterious and spiritual.⁷⁹ Gandhi had spoken of the satanic forces of modern materialistic civilization, and the need to fight in the world of politics against ‘satanic forces’.⁸⁰ During the struggle for responsible government and social justice in nation-building India, Thomas became engrossed in the study of Indian society. During this period he became conscious that corporate human life was under the power of a “spirit of perversity, some structure of evil, the demonic.”⁸¹ This realization prompted a significant shift early in his theology, viewing sin, and thus redemption in Christ, as essentially corporate as well as individual: “That traditional and modern corporate structures of Indian society were under the sway of demons, fetishes and satanic forces which have to be fought came as an important discovery for me.”⁸²

Significantly, however, Thomas does not interpret sin as a force beyond human nature, thus denying human responsibility for evil. Rather, he understands corporate sin as integrally related to the sins of self-righteous individuals: “The human self stands in vital relation to structures of society, dynamics of history and the material creation. Therefore, idolatry and sin pervert these corporate relationships and make them demonic. And therefore redemption from sin must

⁷⁸ M.M. Thomas, “A Spirituality for Combat”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 29

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* See also, M.M. Thomas, “The Search for New Spiritual Foundations”, T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, pp. 43-48; Otto Rühle, *Karl Marx: His Life and Works*, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/ruhle/1928/marx/ch08.htm>.

⁸⁰ M.M. Thomas, “A Spirituality for Combat”, p. 29

⁸¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Victorious Christ and the Search for World Community,” *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 38

⁸² M.M. Thomas, “A Spirituality for Combat”, p. 30

mean victory over the corporate demons.”⁸³ This does not mean, however, that the solution to corporate sin finds any easy resolution through redemption of individual sin. While not diminishing the reality of individual sin, Thomas stresses that no ‘individual salvation’ can alone change oppressive structures and dehumanising institutions. There is a need for ‘corporate salvation’ in the resurrected Christ, who is ‘victorious over structures of evil’⁸⁴

Gandhi’s search for a religious spirituality to combat the spiritual evils present in the corporate life of India had a deep impact on Thomas, prompting in depth Bible study with other members of the Student Christian Movement of Kerala. Thomas found in the Bible, “not merely the Christ who brought divine forgiveness to individuals but also the Christ’s victory over ‘principalities and powers.’”⁸⁵ He considered these principalities and powers as “the sins of idolatry of many generations accumulated and institutionalised in social structures, economic systems and cultural traditions and which have acquired an independent momentum in our common life and on individuals now living.”⁸⁶ Thomas was deeply conscious and concerned about the effects of corporate sin in the lives of those exploited by economic, political, religious and cultural structures of Indian society.

The significance of this period in Thomas’s life and for his theology cannot be overlooked. For Thomas, the process of nation-building essentially included the search for ‘spirituality’ conducive to the pursuit of social justice and humanity for the victims of corporate sin in India. M.M. Thomas’s reflections on corporate sin are thus undertaken with a deep theological concern for human community. He believed Christ to be victorious over every power of evil obstructing true human community, and thus crucial for contemporary India:⁸⁷ “Certainly sin has its corporate expression in the dehumanizing spiritual forces of corporate life, the demons of principalities and powers; and the victory of Christ over them and salvation in Christ must find its

⁸³ M.M. Thomas, “The Dynamics of the Kingdom of God in History”, *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 71

⁸⁴ M.M. Thomas, “The Development Situation.” Manuscript for lectures delivered in Mumbai, September, 1976. UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁸⁵ M.M. Thomas, “A Spirituality for Combat”, p. 30

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ M.M. Thomas, “The Victorious Christ and the Search for World Community”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 1994, p. 39

manifestation in power over these forces as power for the humanisation of our structures of collective existence.”⁸⁸ Only in Christ could the obstacles to human community be overcome.

2.8. God acts in History

For Thomas, God’s relationship to humanity and the world is essentially historical. God acts and relates to humanity and the world within history, beginning with creation: “Yahweh reveals his actions in the history of humankind. The history of the world is the history of God’s [covenantal] promises to the humans, and their fulfilment; in fact they appear as events in history.”⁸⁹ God created humanity, a humanity capable of responding to God and discerning God’s purposes for the world (Gen.1:27; 2:7, 22, 5:1-3, 24; 6:9; 9:9); God punished humanity that rejected responsibility to God and neighbour, contrary to the purpose of God (Gen. 3:16-19, 23-24; 4:1-13; 7:21; 11:8).⁹⁰ The consequence of sin in the world resulted in the judgment of God, yet God resisted the temptation to destroy humanity through the flood, and entered into a covenant of Preservation with the fallen world through Noah.⁹¹ God’s initial contempt for the wickedness of the heart of humanity, leading to the divine pronouncement: “I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground”,⁹² shifted to the compassionate proclamation: “neither will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done.”⁹³ Rather than allow history to end in natural tragedy, God proposes a ‘remedy for destruction.’⁹⁴ Thus the covenant of ‘preservation’ with Noah re-established the order of creation, introducing a rule of law and order. Given the human tendency to selfishness, God developed instruments of legal justice to limit the destructive human potential, establishing laws against

⁸⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 8

⁸⁹ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *God the Liberator Exodus*, Tiruvalla: CSS Books, 2004, pp. 15-16

⁹⁰ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *In the Beginning God: Genesis 1-12:4*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2003, pp. 24-25

⁹¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Living God”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p.77

⁹² Gen. 6: 5-7. M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *In the Beginning God*, p. 117

⁹³ Gen. 8: 21. *Ibid.*, p. 118

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

human wickedness and introducing the seeds of mutual human accountability.⁹⁵ These laws were established to preserve the dignity of human life within sinful society.⁹⁶

The preservation of the fallen world through God's covenant with Noah has meaning, notes Thomas, in light of God's ultimate plan to root out sinfulness from the spirit of humanity, as witnessed through the third covenant, the covenant of Redemption made with Abraham.⁹⁷ This covenant was the "first step in the history of the mighty acts of God for the redemption of humanity from sin itself".⁹⁸ Thomas is critical, however, that the Abrahamic covenant of redemption is often separated from the history of the Adamic and Noahic covenants, leading to a false understanding of the meaning of redemption.⁹⁹ Thomas argues that the election of a specific community by God through Abraham must be read in wider context of the covenants made for *all* humanity. Only then can the ultimate purpose of God to bless 'all the families of the earth' be truly comprehended.¹⁰⁰ Only in this context, set within the framework of a universal beginning and a universal end encompassing all humanity can the specific election, identity and mission to the people of Israel be interpreted.¹⁰¹ This becomes essential to understanding Thomas's reflections on the relation between Church and the world through the paradigm of *koinonia*- in-Christ. God acts in history for the redemption of all humanity from the alienation of sin and disintegration of community.

2.8. Human Community, Law and Justice

The integral relationship between 'law' and 'liberation' becomes clear for Thomas through the covenant at Mt. Sinai. The people of Israel are reminded that God's act of liberation is foundational for God's covenant relationship with them.

⁹⁵ For example, God declared, "whoever sheds the blood of man, by blood shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6). M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", p. 43

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Living God", *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 78

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", pp. 41-42

¹⁰⁰ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *In the Beginning God*, p. 23

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Indeed, notes Thomas, the Ten Commandments begin: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exod. 20:2).”¹⁰² Thus, the law is a symbol of divine grace, with no contradiction between the two.¹⁰³

In the context of liberation from slavery in Egypt, the laws given at Mt. Sinai highlight that God reveals a concern for ‘freedom and justice of the human community.’¹⁰⁴ The divine vocation given to Israel is to create a community where there is no slavery, manifesting the dignity of humanity created in God’s own image, and observing mutual responsibilities for human justice.¹⁰⁵ All ordinances given by Moses to the people affirmed human dignity before God, including the right of human life and the responsibility for social ordering rendering justice to the poor, orphans and aliens.¹⁰⁶ Failure to observe these laws in favour of justice within the community resulted in divine anger and judgment: “The LORD’s anger is kindled against those who oppress the poor and the down-trodden, and it brings judgment on the community.”¹⁰⁷

The integral relationship between devotion to God and God’s justice within social life is found, notes Thomas, in the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament, which condemned human piety at the expense of justice. God shows favour to the poor and the oppressed within the Israelite community, just as God showed favour to the oppressed in Egypt.¹⁰⁸ Once again, however, Thomas stresses that the divine laws within prophetic discourse are not restricted to the Israelite community, but concerned with the whole of humankind: “Just as God created all humankind he also executes judgment over all humankind. Amos says that Yahweh’s justice is equally applicable to Damascus (1:3), Gaza (1:6), Tyre (1:9), Edom (1:11), Ammonites (1:13), Moab (2:1), Judah (2:4) and Israel (2:6).”¹⁰⁹ Further, Thomas acknowledges that the liberation of any society from slavery is a result of the pressure from

¹⁰² M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *God the Liberator: Exodus*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 21

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Yahweh. Just as God liberated the Israelites from Egypt, so has God acted as liberator in the history of other communities, as noted in Amos 9:7: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?” says the LORD. ‘Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?’¹¹⁰ Significantly, if any nation or people are liberated then it is due to God’s powerful act within history for the fulfilment of God’s purposes, “whether they recognize this truth or not.”¹¹¹

Despite the prophetic call for justice, however, the law was unable to destroy the rebellious spirit of the people who continued to be unfaithful to God. Thus the prophetic voice foresaw the emergence of a new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt,...I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.¹¹²

This new covenant would be offered to all people until justice had been established across the earth (Isa: 42:4-7), with the creation of a new humanity liberated from the slavery of ‘all Pharaohs.’¹¹³ Through the new covenant, established in Jesus Christ, the “social, liberation purposes underlying the old covenant, and which was incapable of getting practiced on the basis of it, will get realised powerfully in history.”¹¹⁴ In his early meditations, *The Realization of the Cross*, Thomas writes:

When thus God sent his own Son into the world to befriend the sinner and to seek and save the lost, the very essence of the humanity which is of God was revealed in all its fullness. In a real sense it became available for the human race...The very nature of God’s relationship with man was unveiled in him as a fact in history – the fact we call Redemption.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Amos 9:7. *Ibid.*, p. 26

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Jer. 31: 31-33. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, p. 11

3. The Christology of M.M. Thomas

The theology of M.M. Thomas cannot be understood apart from his Christology, for he views the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as the guarantee of God's redemptive purpose for humanity. Christ thus becomes the central focus of the creation-fall-redemption-consummation paradigm.¹¹⁶ Although Thomas's Christology is examined as a separate unit here, it remains integrally connected to and continuous with the observations made in the previous section.

3.1. The Incarnation of Christ

M.M. Thomas interprets the salvation act of God in Jesus Christ to be a historical event representing the goal of human history.¹¹⁷ Reflecting on the core message of the Christian Gospel, he writes: "It is for the...sake of the world that God became man in Jesus Christ. The heart of the gospel is that God loved the world so much that he gave his only begotten Son to be its salvation (John 3:16), that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:9)."¹¹⁸ The Incarnation of God as a human person in relationship with other human persons becomes "the spiritual basis of the dignity and rights of human beings as persons in society."¹¹⁹ It is,

[t]he revelation of the truth that the universe itself is personal in nature. Human beings have inalienable rights only in the light of God's relation with them as persons, as manifested in the incarnation. The Gospel has been a message of dignity and hope for the outcaste and the poor wherever a living church has communicated the gospel of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ M.M. Thomas, "The Victorious Christ and the Search for World Community", *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 38

¹¹⁷ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *Spiritual Body: 1 Corinthians*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2005, p. 30

¹¹⁸ M.M. Thomas, "Spirituality for Combat", Roger Hedlund, *Roots of the Great Debate in Mission: Mission in Historical and Theological Perspective*, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 4th Edition, 2002, p. 358

¹¹⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Divine Incarnation: Hope for The New Human Community", *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 19

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Challenging the thoughts of Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda, Thomas emphasised the importance of the historical Jesus. Vivekananda had spoken of the uncertainty of a religion and a human salvation which depended upon a historical person: “If there is one blow to the historicity of that life...the whole building tumbles down, never to regain its lost status.”¹²¹ Stressing the Hindu precedence on relating salvation to ‘principles’, Vivekananda argued:

It is in vain if we try to gather together all the peoples of the world around a single personality. It is difficult to make them gather together around eternal and universal principles. If it ever becomes possible to bring the largest portion of humanity to one way of thinking in regard to religion, mark you, it must always be through principles and not through persons.¹²²

While not discounting the reality of Jesus’ historicity, Vivekananda questions whether this historicity holds any theological significance for a spiritual faith.¹²³ Gandhi had argued that proof or otherwise of Jesus’ life would not diminish the validity of the Sermon on the Mount.¹²⁴ Thomas quotes Gandhi, who wrote: “it would be poor comfort to the world, if it had to depend upon a historical God who died 2000 years ago...Do not then preach the God of history but show Him as He lives today through you.”¹²⁵

In response, M.M. Thomas argued:

Probably one of the most significant tasks for a theology of mission is to restate the significance of the historicity of the Person of Jesus within the essential core of the Christian message. It is only if a historical event belongs to the essence of the Christian Gospel that historical human existence can acquire a positive relation to our eternal salvation.¹²⁶

Elsewhere Thomas writes: “The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ of Nazareth understood as the culmination of God’s revelatory activity is the most

¹²¹ Swami Vivekananda, quoted in, M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Madras: CLS, 1971, p. 27

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29

indubitable proof that the world of history is the sphere of God's mighty works and the object of God's love."¹²⁷

Certainly M.M. Thomas did not dismiss the significance of the spiritual and moral principles of Jesus Christ which had been so significant in the lives of many Indians, including Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi. Indeed Thomas called for further theological exploration concerning the relationship between 'principle' and 'person', which he considered to be similar to the relationship between Law and Grace. The principle, he notes, when made self-sufficient and autonomous, inevitably falls into the spirit of self-righteousness, thus introducing contradiction and ultimately tragedy into its strivings for moral regeneration. Thomas quotes the words of John Mathai: "There is a distinction well observed in the teaching of Christ: knowledge of right is not the same thing as the power to do right."¹²⁸ In a critical examination of the thoughts of Gandhi, M.M. Thomas argues that the human search for self-righteousness cannot be overcome by 'more moral principles', but rather through the power of Divine forgiveness offered in Christ.¹²⁹ Thus the significance of the Gospel lies beyond mere moral principle or philosophic doctrine, and must be viewed as historic news which is bound to the historical person of Christ, the bearer of salvation for all humankind.¹³⁰

3.2. The Cross of Christ

We may agree with T.M. Philip that as Christology lies at the heart of M.M. Thomas's theology, so does the Cross lie at the heart of his Christology.¹³¹ In this section I shall examine Thomas's interpretation of the Cross as it relates to God's

¹²⁷ M.M. Thomas, "Faith and History", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XII, No. 4, December, 1965, p. 3

¹²⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 32

¹²⁹ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM Press, 1969, pp. 235-236

¹³⁰ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 29; M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *Spiritual Body: 1 Corinthians*, Tiruvalla: CSS Books, 2005, p. 31.

¹³¹ T.M. Philip, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62

love, the victory of Christ over principalities and powers and to Divine forgiveness and Grace.

3.2.1. The Cross as Love

M.M. Thomas writes of the Cross of Christ: “The cross was the supreme fact in the life of Jesus. It was the supreme moment in the manifestation of God’s own life, the moment when he revealed his very self in relation to the human race.¹³² In a contemporary world which seems indifferent to human relations, human beings long to love and be loved. The Cross overcomes the tragedy of *lovelessness* as a consequence of self-love: “The Cross reveals God and His purpose for His whole creation as Love. It gives the assurance that the universe has at its centre not a Chaos, not even a cold, calculating Mind, but a Cross – i.e. a heart throbbing for all men with understanding, suffering and forgiving love.”¹³³

Through the Cross, God’s love and desire to be in relationship to humanity is fully revealed. In response to human sin and ignorance, God’s love is voluntarily given for the forgiveness of sin.¹³⁴ It is a self-emptying act of redemptive love whereby all may enter into fellowship with God and express this love in community with neighbour. In a devotional prayer Thomas writes: “Father, every time we wander away from your presence, we hurt you afresh and make you unhappy. But your love never fails to pursue us, and you love us out of our sinfulness.”¹³⁵ Through the Cross of Christ, God literally ‘loves’ sinful humanity ‘out of our sinfulness’. It is this love, expressed so clearly in the Cross of Christ, which becomes the foundation for the divine-human relationship and for true human community.

3.2.2. Victory over Principalities and Powers

The Cross, for Thomas, represents a “decisive historical event in which God drives out the Prince of this world”.¹³⁶ Through the Cross and resurrection sin is

¹³² M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, p. 13

¹³³ M.M. Thomas, “The Cross and the Kingdom of God”, *New Creation in Christ*, p. 18

¹³⁴ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, p. 12

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 33

¹³⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The New Creation in Christ”, *New Creation in Christ*, p. 19

overcome, and thus interpreted as victory over all structures of evil, and finally death itself.¹³⁷ Recollecting a visit to Oslo in a 1954 sermon, Thomas writes:

I remember visiting the Vigeland Park in Oslo, where I saw carved in stone, a man struggling with a big lizard representing humanity's struggle with the cosmic powers of evil. In that story, man gets finally crushed to death by the lizard. If that is the ultimate truth about man, then life and labour are all in vain. But from Vigeland's Park one goes to the Oslo Cathedral and the theme of the famous paintings of the ceiling is *Christus Victor* – Christ victorious over the dragon through the Cross, Christ reigning over the cosmic powers, Christ coming again as the Lord of Glory – these are the pictures – pictures that speak of deliverance from the powers of evil, offered to man in Christ Jesus.¹³⁸

This provides a wonderful insight into M.M. Thomas's reflections on the Cross as victory over principalities and powers, here represented as the lizard crushing the life of humanity. The image of Christ as *Christus Victor* is thus central to Thomas's theology.¹³⁹ Through Christ's death and resurrection humanity is redeemed from sin, that is, from human rebellion and broken relationship with God.¹⁴⁰ Thomas writes: "At the Cross of Christ, the utter devastatingness of God's judgment upon guilt and the utter self-giving, forgiving love and identification with which God embraces the sinner are revealed."¹⁴¹ The juxtaposition of judgement and forgiveness is evident in the Cross event. It is this reality, experienced not as a once for all but daily reality, which provides the basis for Thomas's optimism, and caution, in the struggle for humanisation, justice and social transformation.

3.2.3. The Cross and Human Community

In a sermon delivered in Dimapur, 1991, M.M. Thomas asks: "What is the secret of human community?"¹⁴² Here Thomas reflects on the power of moral law,

¹³⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 61

¹³⁸ M.M. Thomas, Title Unknown, unpublished Sermon, 1954, UTC Archives.

¹³⁹ M.M. Thomas affirms the influence of Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*. See Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd Edition, University of Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 417-419

¹⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, "Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility", unpublished autobiography, UTC Archives, Bangalore, 1972, p. 83

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² M.M. Thomas, "The Gospel of Christ Crucified", *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 86

scientific advancement or philosophical knowledge as sources of communion with God and neighbour. Obedience to moral law is certainly of importance, he suggests, challenging moral lawlessness. Yet, while moral law may be considered a pointer to divine love, the moral legalist approach of obedience to duty cannot by itself create true community.¹⁴³ Even when one zealously seeks to serve one's neighbour, 'inner conflict' means that such action is conducted in "utter self-righteousness and self-love...without any real love of neighbour."¹⁴⁴ Quoting from I Corinthians, Thomas writes: "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing."¹⁴⁵ Noting Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Publican praying in the temple, Thomas observes that the Pharisee alienates himself from both God and from neighbour because of his devotion to a moral law which affirms superiority over the Publican.¹⁴⁶ The path of moral law cannot be the ultimate path of community because it can too easily become self-centred and thus anti-community.

M.M. Thomas also acknowledges the potential benefits for the development of human community resulting from scientific and technological knowledge, as well as modern education:

Let us not minimise the achievements of reason and science. It has made the world one; and I know how much education has meant for the villagers of India in freeing them from ignorance and superstition and how much science and technics may mean to lift up the hungry millions, how much scientific medicine can mean to a village which by habit has come to think of every disease as due to a spell of some evil power. Knowledge certainly means power and freedom, in one sense.¹⁴⁷

Yet, he adds, such knowledge is inadequate to create true community, as evidenced by the continued exploitation of one nation over another, and the growing gulf being between rich and the poor. While it may be true that knowledge has produced new ideas relating to inter-personal relationship and inter-cultural community, "it has

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 87

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ I Cor. 13:3, *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ Luke 18:14, *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ M.M. Thomas, Unpublished Sermon, title unknown, 1954, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

also added new power to the traditional oppressor and created new forms of oppression throughout the world.”¹⁴⁸

In a similar fashion, M.M. Thomas disputes the possibility of philosophical knowledge for creating true human community. Referring to the *jnāna* path of spiritual knowledge, Thomas acknowledges the importance of knowledge of spiritual communion with the whole of creation, but adds critically that the ‘spirituality of cosmic unity’ has often accepted inequality within human society, as evidenced in the caste system of India.¹⁴⁹

In light of the above, Thomas asks: “If thus moral law cannot create community and if knowledge, scientific, philosophical or spiritual cannot do it, what is the path to overcome alienation of persons and peoples from one another and to reconcile them to create community?”¹⁵⁰ His answer brings us again to the heart of his theology; the Cross of Christ: “The New Testament says that it is to be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the foot of the Cross, all human beings and peoples find themselves to be one in the sin of crucifying God incarnate and one in the realization of Divine forgiveness, in the mercy of God freely and undeservedly given.”¹⁵¹ At the foot of Christ humanity finds both judgment of sin and the redemptive grace of God’s forgiveness. At the Cross humanity finds the key to true human community, bound together in the redemption of God through Christ.

The issue of forgiveness in the context of hierarchical caste hegemony remains a significant concern for Dalit theologians, an issue to be addressed in subsequent chapters. Significantly, Thomas does not seek to shy away from the reality of division in India. Indeed, it is precisely within the context of divisiveness that he considers the Cross essential: “It is here that the experience of human solidarity in sin and forgiving grace at the foot of the Cross of Christ becomes a source of a vision of a new humanity transcending diverse communities but also of a

¹⁴⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel of Christ Crucified”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 88

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

reconciling power breaking down or lowering the walls of partition between them.”¹⁵²

3.3. The Resurrection of Christ

M.M. Thomas writes that the Cross of Jesus Christ without the resurrection is nothing but a grim tragedy.¹⁵³ The reality of resurrection provides the believer with a sense of security and a “conviction that God is ultimately in control and his purposes for us are good and eternal.”¹⁵⁴ Significantly, Thomas stresses the importance of the bodily resurrection of Christ: “If Christ rose in the body, the redemption he wrought was not merely of my spirit or soul, but one of the whole of me, body, mind and soul, and of the whole relationship to nature and men.”¹⁵⁵ Redemption in Christ could not, for Thomas, be interpreted merely as a message of human spirituality, but must be concerned with the wholeness of the human being, humanity and creation. The bodily resurrection of Jesus emphasises, in line with Pauline theology, that the body is a vital element of human personhood to be redeemed.¹⁵⁶ Thus the body, and the material existence of everyday life, are essential components of redeemed personality.

M.M. Thomas essentially opposes a ‘lopsided’ Christian understanding of salvation perceived in purely spiritual and individualistic terms. Quoting from a study of village Christians in Andhra, South India, which highlighted an exclusive spiritualistic interpretation of salvation, Thomas notes that Christians “worship Jesus for the salvation of their souls while they worship village deities for harvest, health and well-being.”¹⁵⁷ By acknowledging God as Lord of all creation, with a concern for the welfare of humanity and the created order, Thomas theologially posits that liberation cannot but include the concern for health, economic welfare and social

¹⁵² M.M. Thomas, “Reconciled Diversity”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 70

¹⁵³ M.M. Thomas, *The Realization of the Cross*, p. 28

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ M.M. Thomas, “The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formulation of a True Secular Humanism”, *Student World*, Geneva: WSF, 2nd Quarter, 1953, p. 138

¹⁵⁶ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *Spiritual Body*, Contextual Theological Bible Commentary on the book of 1 Corinthians, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2005, p. 22

¹⁵⁷ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *In the Beginning God: Genesis 1-12:4*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2003, p. 22. Study conducted by Bishop Victor Premasagar, former Principal of Andhra Christian Theological College.

justice.¹⁵⁸ He writes: “God is concerned, not merely with saving souls for heaven but with saving the whole human being – including his/her life in the body, life in society, life of relation with the world of nature, the earth and the sun, the forests, mountains and oceans – that is human beings in their totality as bodily, social and spiritual persons.”¹⁵⁹ Redemption is not limited to the future when Christ comes again, but is realised in part within history. In the resurrection of Christ the power of the Kingdom of God moves “into the history of mankind taking control of the powers of this world and bringing men to righteousness of God in which the New Age has arrived.”¹⁶⁰ Thomas writes:

His empty tomb shows that the Kingdom of God has already come and broken into this world of sin. Death is already conquered as the last enemy. God has vindicated His Son, His only Son. Creator assumed creaturehood but returns to sharing the glory of the Father. He ascends to His Father and yet He says He is always with us. He has broken the barriers of space and time and the material world. Mary recognises the Lord when he calls her. Each one of us is named and He calls us by our name, to be partakers of His victory, members of His Kingdom, here and now and for ever more!¹⁶¹

Thomas confesses the difficulty in grasping this concept: “The inter-relation of the resurrection faith, the heavenly hope and the dynamism for the renewal of life now is always difficult to grasp and more difficult to stay with.”¹⁶² Yet it is within this tension that the resurrection message becomes significant as the source of hope for the transformation of society and human relations within the contemporary world.

3.4. Forgiveness

Asked to reflect upon one aspect of faith that had been particularly important throughout his theological life, M.M. Thomas responded: “it was not difficult to come to the conclusion that it was the Gospel of Divine Forgiveness offered in the

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ M.M. Thomas, “World Renewed in Christ and the Lay Vocation”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 59

¹⁶⁰ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 15

¹⁶¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Empty Tomb”, *Life in Quiet Trust*, Unpublished Meditations, No. 34, 1969

¹⁶² M.M. Thomas, “Hard to Handle”, *One World*, April, 1978, p. 17

Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus.”¹⁶³ At a personal level, the forgiveness of God offered at the Cross gives to personal life a sense of worth and destiny, despite any moral, intellectual or spiritual despair.¹⁶⁴ He adds:

But it also gives him/her a realization of solidarity with all men and women before God, both in sin and divine forgiveness and opens up the vision and power of a new human fellowship and a new humanity in Christ. In that sense the divine forgiveness offered in Christ is deeply social in character, and provides the source, the criterion and goal of the struggle everywhere today for new societies which can do justice to the dignity of the human being.¹⁶⁵

The Cross is where human self-centredness is broken and restored under Divine grace to form a new human solidarity based upon mutual forgiveness.¹⁶⁶ As the human person acknowledges humbly the divine forgiveness offered through Christ, so too are they open to affirm their, “oneness with all men as sinners forgiven and as brothers for whom Christ Jesus died.”¹⁶⁷ Human fellowship is thus a fellowship of forgiven sinners.¹⁶⁸ The distinction made between race, religion, caste, class, and nation, have little importance when viewed in light of the divine forgiveness at the foot of the Cross. Thomas writes: “All are brothers and equal in the light of the forgiveness God had given to all in Christ.”¹⁶⁹ Thus divine forgiveness has implications beyond the personal as the basis for social transformation. Indeed divine forgiveness is the only basis in which the enemy can become a true brother or sister.¹⁷⁰ Thomas argues: “The community of forgiven sinners becomes also the beginning of a New Humanity in History. It transcends all division of nature and history because it is based on the common acknowledgement of solidarity in sin and Divine Forgiveness.”¹⁷¹ Thomas’s reflections on forgiveness

¹⁶³ M.M. Thomas, “The Divine Forgiveness”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p.1

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2

¹⁶⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel of Christ Crucified”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 88

¹⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, “Love Your Enemies”, Sermon, 12 March, 1969, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁶⁸ M.M. Thomas, handwritten notes on Colossians 3:10-13, 1970

¹⁶⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Love Your Enemies”, 1969

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ M.M. Thomas, “What Ye Think of Christ?” Unpublished Bible Study delivered at the Mar Thoma Students Conference, 1970

are central to his reflections on the role Christianity could play in the nation-building search of newly independent India.

3.5. New Humanity in Christ

New Humanity in Christ is a key paradigm for M.M. Thomas's theological reflection, framed within the broader paradigm of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. Thomas rejects the notion that redemption in Christ is a 'return to the paradise lost,'¹⁷² suggesting that in Christ there is a *new* reality 'pregnant with the promise and power of renewal'.¹⁷³ The basic weakness of law in the Old Testament, notes Thomas, is that it could not ultimately provide a solution to humanity's spiritual rebellion against God.¹⁷⁴ The prophetic tradition promised a new Moses in which humankind would be 'liberated from all Pharaohs', leading to the creation of a new humanity and a new human race.¹⁷⁵ The fulfilment of the prophetic tradition is found in Jesus Christ, through whom a new covenant is established with humanity and all creation. This Messiah comes not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfil them. (Mat. 5:17)¹⁷⁶ While the law was unable to deliver humanity from the sin of self-justification and self-righteousness, the Cross of Christ reveals the love and grace of God for sinful humanity, a love which "eradicates self-love and enmity to God which is at the spiritual centre of the human person."¹⁷⁷ The Gospel is thus the message of a Christ who makes all things new:

God by raising Jesus Christ from the dead makes all things new. At the Cross, all things are exposed as nothing and judged worthy only of death and annihilation. But in the Resurrection of Jesus, God not only raises Jesus from the dead, but out of nothing He also brings into being, in the Risen Christ, a new world, a new

¹⁷² M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, p. 50

¹⁷³ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 61

¹⁷⁴ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *God the Liberator: Exodus*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 41

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29

¹⁷⁷ M.M. Thomas, quoted in T.M. Philip, *op. cit.*, p. 63

creation...In Christ, 'Old things are passed away: behold all things are become new.'¹⁷⁸

In Jesus Christ, the redemptive purpose of God for creation is revealed in terms of reconciliation to God and the creation of a human community founded in love.¹⁷⁹ The redemption hoped for in the Old Testament becomes a present reality within the world following the death and resurrection of Christ, releasing a "universal power within and between the divided communities destroying the spirit of enmity and creating a ferment of genuine humanism working towards the unity of all humanity and all creation."¹⁸⁰ New Humanity in Christ offers the possibility of transformation of the pattern of life in the world.¹⁸¹ Humanity is thus called to discern the presence and activity of Christ, becoming co-workers with Christ for the renewal of the world.¹⁸² This means working, in response to the divine forgiveness in Christ, to renew structures of society to develop a true human community.

To the extent that human beings live in the realm of the redemptive love of Christ, argues M.M. Thomas, they are 'released from the law.'¹⁸³ Yet Thomas is clear that humanity lives between the present and the future consummation of the Kingdom of God. In Christ the "New Age has been inaugurated in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ", but history is moving towards the time of ultimate redemption of all things in the Consummation of the Kingdom of God.¹⁸⁴ Being free from the law, therefore, does not mean that laws are not necessary within society:

Christians like everyone else are self-centred and need checks to self aggression and exploitation. Perfect love is not a possibility in this fallen world whether we are Christians or others... True "there is no room for fear in love; perfect love banishes fear" (1 John 4:18). Till perfection comes in the end, sinful human beings will always need the fear of moral law in their own conscience, and

¹⁷⁸ M.M. Thomas, "The New Creation in Christ", *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 2

¹⁷⁹ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *God the Liberator: Exodus*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 30; M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, p. 52

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53

¹⁸² M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, pp. 61-62
Emphasis added.

¹⁸³ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", p. 56

¹⁸⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The New Creation in Christ", *New Creation in Christ*, pp. 1-2

when that fails the fear of the law of State, with the Police behind it.¹⁸⁵

In the 'penultimate' reality of the world before the end in Christ, when creativity can turn so easily into destruction and exploitation, questions of law and justice demand constant revision and accountability. Here the Cross becomes not a once for all occurrence but a vital daily reality in the world, challenging structures of power manifest in the form of class, caste or nation, in order to redress the balance of power in favour of justice.

3.5. Consummation of the Kingdom

In a sermon to a group of graduating students at United Theological College, Bangalore, M.M. Thomas reminds those gathered of the core of Christian Gospel message: "Then comes the end, when he [Jesus] delivers the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."¹⁸⁶ (I Cor. 15:24-25) Here Thomas points to the end, when Christ delivers the Kingdom to God. Expressing the significance of this passage, he writes:

This whole Corinthian passage is most significant for an understanding of the Gospel of Christ. It speaks of its various dimensions. It is the Gospel of the Risen Christ as the guarantee of the resurrection of all men in Christ. It is the gospel of the kingly rule of Christ, overcoming sin and all the structures of evil, and finally death itself, and of the end-event, namely the conversion of the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God through Christ.¹⁸⁷

Ultimately, therefore, salvation is interpreted by Thomas in eschatological terms. The Christian creed declares the whole of creation to be reconciled to God in Christ, who will come again in glory to consummate His Kingdom, the final point and

¹⁸⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", p. 56

¹⁸⁶ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom of God in History", p. 61

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61

ultimate meaning for history.¹⁸⁸ The Kingdom of God on earth cannot be conceived or achieved by a sinful humanity.¹⁸⁹ Christian eschatology points to the fulfilment of the historical destiny of the created order, a consummation which relates to the world of persons but has essential social and cosmic implications: “All things will be summed up in Him [Christ] in the end.”¹⁹⁰ There is an eschatological hope in Christ beyond history.

When the Kingdom of God finally comes, it must “come as the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven, with judgment and redemption on the social history, which by itself cannot fulfil its destiny.”¹⁹¹ Thomas does not, therefore, consider humanisation and salvation to be identical. Rather, he considers humanisation to be *integrally related* to salvation.¹⁹² The reality of the consummation of all things in Christ does not mean that Christian life is “suspended between a ‘has been’ and a ‘not yet’.”¹⁹³ Christian life is more than simply living between the resurrection and consummation.¹⁹⁴ It is concerned with responsible living in the world towards a new humanity in Christ whose ultimate reality is eschatological. Thus, for Thomas: “Salvation remains eschatological, but the historical responsibility within the eschatological framework *cannot but include the task of humanisation of the world* in secular history.”¹⁹⁵

While there is no continuity between the historical and the eschatological, there are however, “infinite possibilities of the eschatological becoming historical.”¹⁹⁶ The message of divine forgiveness in Christ is not to be considered merely ‘beyond history’, and therefore beyond politics the struggle for power in the

¹⁸⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formation of a True Secular Humanism”, *Student World*, Geneva: WSF, 2nd Quarter, 1953, p. 139

¹⁸⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The Social Implication of the Creed”, *The Guardian*, Vol. XIX, No. 16, April 24, 1941, p. 296

¹⁹⁰ M.M. Thomas, “The Challenge to the Churches in the New Nations in Africa and Asia”. Speech presented to the World Council of Churches Assembly, New Delhi, 28 November, 1961. Manuscript, UTC Archives. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹¹ M.M. Thomas, quoted in, T.M. Philip, *op. cit.*, p. 22

¹⁹² M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 8

¹⁹³ Paul Devanandan, quoted in M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel and the Quest for Modern Asia”, *Union Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3, March, 1967, p. 236

¹⁹⁴ M.M. Thomas, “Christ at the Right hand of God”, 1967, Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁹⁵ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 8. Emphasis added.

¹⁹⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The Meaning of Salvation Today”, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, Madras: CLS, 1978, p. 187

worldly realm.¹⁹⁷ Rather it is a message of power to transform the world in order that humanity may become 'more human.'¹⁹⁸ The historical and the eternal are inter-related in that there is a "reality of the historical and the human in the eternal, and the presence of the eternal in the historical and the human."¹⁹⁹ While the most perfect human society, bound by sin, cannot be equated with the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of 'resurrection-life' does not start beyond death, but begins and is 'partially realised' within the dimension of history.²⁰⁰ Thus the goal of the Church and the Christian community is to translate its eschatological hope into partial but time-bound historical hopes.²⁰¹

3.6. Solidarity with the oppressed

K.P. Kuruvila notes that there is no thorough discussion within M.M. Thomas's writings regarding God and suffering. Yet Kuruvila correctly acknowledges that Thomas's affirmation of the crucifixion of Jesus as "the symbol of God as suffering love identifying himself with the agony of oppressed humanity"²⁰² is an ever present theme in Thomas's theology.²⁰³ Despite a universal understanding of sin, Thomas acknowledges the reality of the oppressed within humanity, victims of injustice and exploitation at the hands of corporate structures motivated by individual and collective self-righteousness. Thus the demand for justice is a prevalent concern within Thomas's writings based on his theological understanding of the love and purpose of God as revealed in Christ: "The Christian concern for Justice may be defined as the faith-response to God's loving and righteous purpose for the world as revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."²⁰⁴ To work for justice in the world is thus regarded as a faith response to God in Christ. As the Cross in India has been regarded by both Christians and

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 10

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9

²⁰¹ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 25

²⁰² M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, West Bombay: BUILD, 1984, p. 4

²⁰³ K.P. Kuruvila, *op. cit.*, p. 146

²⁰⁴ M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 4

non-Christians as the “identification of God with the victims of history”,²⁰⁵ so too is it the basis of Christian identification with the victims of oppression within the contemporary world:²⁰⁶

Why does the Church come into the picture? Because the God of Jesus Christ is in solidarity with victims of oppression... The crucifixion of Christ is an event in history which reveals God identifying himself with the suffering people, the victims of oppression and structures of evil... It is the event of the Cross and Resurrection that Christian faith sees the transformation of human life beginning and moving towards the Kingdom of God. The resurrection means that the forces of death and evil which find expression in the oppression of humanity have been and will be finally overcome.²⁰⁷

A significant insight into Thomas’s recognition of God’s solidarity with the victims of society is found in a poetic meditation, written following the great famine of Shertallay, 1941, entitled “Where is God?” The meditation is worth quoting at length:

*There was heaviness in my heart,
A loneliness cut me through,
Have I put my trust in God in vain?
Have I placed my feet on slippery ground?
Vain was the faith in a caring God
Vain was the trust in a loving Father,
For God is with the wicked in their pleasures,
A slave of them of them that seek for themselves,
He prepares a table for them anywhere they want,
And spreads a carpet for them wherever they walk,
He makes them shine like holy men,
And gives the honoured places in His Church,
And in His Heaven, palaces decked with jewels;
But for these, they must fade and fall,
Like flowers in the forest,
With not a soul to watch, nor a tear to mark their end;
Form dust they came, and to dust they return,*

²⁰⁵ Thomas writes, “the crucifixion of Jesus as the symbol of God as Suffering Love identifying Himself with the agony of oppressed humanity, has been a most potent spiritual vision, inspiring many Indians irrespectively of religious or secular labels to identify themselves with the poor and downtrodden.” *Ibid.*, p. 4

²⁰⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Theological Aspects of the Relationship Between Social Action Groups and Churches”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, June, 1984, p. 19

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20

And no God cares.

...But then thought I,

*The sun had set and it was dark,
All around was silence --
The silence of Death;
And while I looked, I saw a flickering light far off;
I made for it; a man was digging a little grave;
Thought I, who must this man be,
Who has strength enough to dig a grave for his little child?
He was weeping as he dug; his sighs were deep, and his sobs loud,
And he was alone, amidst the corpses that lay all around.*

*With fear in my heart,
I approached the man digging the grave, in the flickering light,
He turned his face to me;
Lo, it is Christ!
His eyes were red with weeping, and his face wet with tears,
Jesus wept;
He said to me in a low voice, through sobs,
Why dost thou do this to me?
I thirst, I starve
For in as much as ye did it not to these, ye did it not to me.
I am dying.
Why dost thou break my heart?
For in their afflictions am I afflicted,
In their deaths I am crucified.*

*Then was my heart grieved and I was pricked in my reins,
I had almost said in my heart, Thou dost not Care,
So foolish was I and ignorant,
I was a beast before Thee.
Ye who praise him in the sanctuary,
Ye who call on him with doors all shut,
Open your eyes and See your God is not Before ye,
He is there in the land of desolation,
Alone,
In The dark
Amidst the corpses,
Starving with the millions that starve,
Dying with the millions that Die.²⁰⁸*

²⁰⁸ Excerpt from M.M. Thomas, "Some Stray Thoughts: Where is God?" *Arundayam: "Famine Special"* Nov. 1941. This meditation is a reflection on Psalm 73.

This poem provides a powerful glimpse into the depths of Thomas's reflections on God's relation to suffering humanity. The title itself reflects Thomas's angst in attempting to theologically grapple with the reality of a loving God and human suffering. In the poem he suggests that it is the very encounter of Jesus at the graves of the people that doubt is transformed, in recognition that God is present amidst the suffering, deeply concerned for those who are afflicted and dying. When this devotion is placed within M.M. Thomas's broader theological framework of creation-fall-redemption and consummation, it becomes clear that Thomas is concerned for the struggle of the suffering and the oppressed in line with the divine purpose of God for humanity, grounded in God's love, and redeemed through the Cross and resurrection of Christ. The recognition of God's solidarity with the oppressed demands Christian responsibility within the context of the suffering in the contemporary world. This involves not mere charity but also involvement to struggle against the status quo power structures in order to work for justice:

It is when Christians identify themselves with the struggles of the poor against poverty and for conditions of true development in concrete situation, and are able to reflect with men of other faiths and no faith on the meaning and end of such struggles, that they can make their unique contribution to the new ideology of a politics of world development...If Christian ecumenism cannot become the dynamic for such a political development, what is it for?²⁰⁹

4. Conclusion

In this chapter a brief overview of M.M. Thomas's theology has been articulated, located within the paradigm of creation-fall-redemption-consummation. At the heart of this paradigm is Thomas's Christology, interpreted as the ultimate act of God within history for the reconciliation of divine-human and human-human relationship. In Christ the law of the prophets is fulfilled and a new covenant is established based upon God's love and desire for the redemption of the world. Through the Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Kingdom of God is

²⁰⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Politics and Development", *RISK*, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1968, UTC Archives, Bangalore, pp. 39-40; 43

inaugurated in history. Christ is victor over sin and death, and becomes the first fruits of the New Creation and guarantee of the future hope of the consummation of the Kingdom of God.²¹⁰

Humanity, for Thomas, has the creative capacity and the responsibility to transform nature and develop tools for the welfare of community life as part of the human vocation. Humanity thus has the creative responsibility to be engaged in social and political action in order to struggle against injustice in the world: “There is always a justification for social and political force in order to control human selfishness and quest for power, in order to prevent humans killing and over exploiting each other in the sinful world and to provide social welfare and justice to all humans, at least in some measure.”²¹¹ Thomas did not advocate Christian withdrawal from the world, but called for direct involvement in the struggle for a just and equal community within society. Significantly for Thomas, the ‘three-fold activity of God’, namely Creation, Judgment and Redemption, motivated by God’s love and directed towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God, continue today through the ferment of development, justice and love within the world.²¹²

God calls human beings to participate with God in all these three levels of Divine mission, namely to participate in programmes of creative development, to be involved in fighting injustice and establishing social justice through the rule of law and other checks to oppressive power and along with it all to participate in the redemptive mission of love.²¹³

Within the dynamic nucleus of Thomas’s theology significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology may be identified. In the subsequent Chapters Thomas’s theology is brought into critical engagement with Dalit theologians in order to assess Thomas’s theological contribution for the emergence of Dalit theology.

²¹⁰ M.M. Thomas *et al.*, “Resurrection as the Basis of a Realistic Humanism”, Editorial: *The Guardian*, Vol. XLIII, No. 15, April 15, 1965, p. 113

²¹¹ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *In the Beginning God: Genesis 1-12:4*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2003, p. 119

²¹² M.M. Thomas, “The Living God”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 78

²¹³ *Ibid.*

Chapter III: Critical Dialogue: M.M. Thomas and Bishop M. Azariah

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter I provided an overview of M.M. Thomas's paradigmatic theological framework, centred on the Incarnation, Cross and New Humanity of Christ within the broader paradigm of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. Through critical textual analysis and personal interview technique, I shall in this chapter examine the theology of first generation Dalit theologian, Bishop Masilamani Azariah, in order to assess the thesis that Thomas contributed significant theological signposts for emerging Dalit theology.

It is argued that M.M. Thomas was a liberation theologian opposed to casteism, class injustice, human indignity and powerlessness, and a man searching for a dynamic theological foundation adequate to the quest for a full, liberating and just Indian society. Within his vision for transformed Indian society, it is argued: 1) Thomas's theological concept of personhood stands opposed to traditional casteism which denies human individuality, equality, dignity, and community; 2) Thomas theologically affirmed the Church's mission to be in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, working towards the transformation of socio-economic injustice; 3) Thomas acknowledged the need for conscientisation of the people, empowering them to participate in the struggle for liberation and transformation of selves and society.

2. The Tension of Ambiguity

Bishop M. Azariah's first reaction to M.M. Thomas's theology is one of rejection. Thomas, he argues, is a Syrian Christian theologian bound within a 'Brahminical mindset.'¹ He informed me: "[Thomas's] Christology had been

¹ Interview, Bishop Azariah, 19th November, 2005, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College.

coloured by his traditional belief system – his non-Christian belief system. A Hindu system conditioned him.”² Indeed Azariah makes this claim for traditional Indian Christian theology in general, effectively rendering it ‘irrelevant’ to the Dalit majority within the Indian Christian community,³ and thus ‘powerless’ as a liberating theology.⁴ From the outset there appears to be little scope for substantiating the thesis that M.M. Thomas offered significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology, at least from the perspective of Azariah. Yet as we probe the writings of Bishop Azariah, the influence of Thomas becomes evident. Indeed, writing of the need for a bold theological re-visioning of the Church in India, Azariah argues:

During the past five decades and despite four of our own language area Theological Colleges and two well known research oriented colleges at Madras and Bangalore not too many writing Prophets have emerged from our own Church. Hence there is a large scope and need for raising well trained theologians from different parts of our great Church. Particularly lay theologians like M.M. Thomas are urgently needed.⁵

One is immediately struck by the ambiguity of Azariah’s position regarding M.M. Thomas. On the one hand there is a rejection of Thomas’s ‘irrelevant’ elite Brahminical theology. On the other Azariah suggests an ‘urgent need’ for theologians like Thomas to offer a prophetic voice within the Church in India. This ambiguity is reflected in Azariah’s methodology, at times sharply exclusive and dismissive of M.M. Thomas, and at other times positively responsive to Thomas’s theological contribution.

3. The Methodology of M. Azariah

There is a strong tendency in Azariah to adopt an exclusive methodology which relies heavily upon creating absolute, dichotomous categories. Applying such

² *Ibid.*

³ M. Azariah, “Doing Theology in India Today”, *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, 130

⁴ Interview, Bishop Azariah.

⁵ M. Azariah, “Growing and Sharing Together in Unity”, *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, March, 1996

a methodology, M.M. Thomas is dismissed for his 'non-Dalit' identity. Bishop Azariah's exclusive methodology is driven by a passionate desire to develop an authentic Christian theology relevant to and representative of Dalits in India. Such a dichotomy finds justification, he argues, given the reality that India is divided by caste system into two societies:⁶

There are two distinct spiritually unequal societies within the Indian nation, the one of dominant caste graded society and the other dominated society which is the victim of casteism...If the most significant and dominant feature of the Indian reality is identified as the schizophrenic division of the nation into two societies, namely, the Hindu caste grade society that is super-imposed on the other pre-Hindu now caste oppressed society, then it becomes logical to recognise caste discrimination and caste oppression as the cause of the split-in-the-middle of the Indian nation.⁷

The Constituent Assembly of India, Azariah notes, made a pernicious 'Himalayan blunder' by labelling the depressed classes and tribes as 'Scheduled Castes and Tribes,' thus identifying these classes within the Hindu religious fold.⁸ This he deemed preposterous given the historical rejection of the Dalits as outcastes excluded from Hindu society.⁹ Azariah criticizes the 1981 census calculations which quoted the existence of 6.5 *lakh* villages, a figure he doubles to 13 *lakh* based upon the reality of the 'schizophrenic split' in the middle of Indian village society.¹⁰ In other words, given the reality of partition between the village and Dalit colony, each village is divided into two separate villages. This divide is not merely geographical, he argues, but multi-faceted, including social, economic, political, psychological and cultural division.¹¹ Reinforcing the reality of this distinct separation, Azariah adopts

⁶ M. Azariah, "Indian Situation Today and the Role of the Church in Justice Concerns", *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 114

⁷ Here the influence of Dr. Ambedkar is affirmed: "It was Dr. Ambedkar who had discerned the existing great gulf in the Indian society already during the period of struggle for Independence in 1940. He said, 'Factually, the Hindus and the Untouchables are divided by a fence made of barbed wire...for, to be a Hindu means not to mix, to be separate in everything...The real genius of Hinduism is to divide...for caste is another name for separation and untouchability typifies the extremist form of separation from community to community.'" M. Azariah, "Christ and Dalit Liberation", *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, pp. 142-143

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 141

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ M. Azariah, "Poverty and Victims of Caste", *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 72

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

an exclusive methodology which essentially sets Dalit theology against the dominant tradition of Indian Christian theology. M.M. Thomas is thus rejected as an elite caste theologian, considered irrelevant to majority of Indian Christians, two thirds of whom are Dalit.¹²

Significantly for our purpose, however, Azariah is not bound within this exclusive methodological framework, although this remains his primary *modus operandi*. Using James Massey's classification of Dalit theology as a 'contextual' rather than a 'counter' theology, it is also possible to locate Azariah as a contextual theologian.¹³ This provides valuable scope which allows us to move beyond the rigidity of exclusive methodological categories in order to identify theological points of resonance between M.M. Thomas and Bishop Azariah. Indeed this space was granted me during a visit to Bishop Azariah's residence in Madras, where he informed me of his great admiration for M.M. Thomas, a fact reinforced by a personal library which included many of Thomas's works. Indeed, this was a key moment in my research journey, opening the path for continued research.

In this chapter it will be important to hold in tension the two methodological approaches of Azariah, for on the one hand we cannot afford to dismiss Azariah's critical rejection of Thomas at certain places. This would be to do injustice to Azariah's position. Yet on the other, we cannot afford to dismiss key points of theological continuity in the theology of M.M. Thomas and Azariah. People, Azariah informed me, are right to quote the work of Thomas. Yet they fail, he added, if they remain where Thomas was, never seeking to go beyond him.¹⁴ This, in a nutshell, captures Azariah's overall response to Thomas; while Thomas did not go far enough in providing a theology relevant to the experience of Dalit Christians, he provided significant theological signposts requiring context specific critical reflection by emerging Dalit theologians.

¹² M. Azariah, "Doing Theology in India Today", *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 130

¹³ James Massey, *Downtrodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997, pp. 76-78.

¹⁴ Conversation with Bishop M. Azariah, Madras, 20th November, 2005.

4. 'Rejecting' M.M. Thomas

As noted above, Bishop Azariah's rejection of M.M. Thomas is sharpest when he adopts a strategic position of methodological exclusivism, a strategy which seeks to discredit the Indian Christian theological tradition as irrelevant to the Dalit Christian majority. Using this methodology, Azariah dismisses M.M. Thomas on the grounds that he is Syrian Christian.¹⁵ The implications of this specific identity are significant for Azariah, who criticizes Thomas on the basis that he is, a) a caste Christian, and therefore, b) a theologian trapped in a 'Brahminical mindset'.

4.1. M.M. Thomas: A Syrian Caste Christian

Bishop Azariah describes the Syrian Christian community as an 'empty Syrian shell', a 'caste community' which produced no theology beyond the interests of its own caste group, and a community which sought no proclamation of the Christian Gospel.¹⁶ The limited expansion of the Syrian Christian community from the fourth to the sixteenth century, recorded by Bishop Stephen Neill as 100,000,¹⁷ demonstrates to Azariah the absence of evangelical zeal.¹⁸ As the source of evangelistic zeal is the Holy Spirit, this Spirit was clearly absent from the Syrian Christian community.¹⁹ Further, notes Azariah, where the Holy Spirit is absent, there can be no liberation.²⁰ While he accepts the Syrian Christian community, including Thomas, had received the Holy Spirit, Azariah suggests this Spirit had been ignored.²¹ The absence of the Holy Spirit meant that Thomas's theology offered no liberation to the outcaste Dalits. His identity as a Syrian Christian essentially

¹⁵ Interview, Bishop Azariah.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Interview, Bishop Azariah; M. Azariah, *Unchristian Side of the Christian Church: The Plight of the Untouchable Converts*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Academy, 1985, p. 7; Stephen Neill, *History of Christian Missions*, 2nd Edition, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986, p. 122.

¹⁸ Bishop Azariah suggested this increase was down to merely 'biological growth'. Interview, Bishop Azariah.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.* Azariah cites 2 Corinthians 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." New Revised Standard Version.

²¹ *Ibid.*

alienated Thomas from Dalits, for this community had historically been unconcerned with the plight of the untouchables.²²

Bishop Azariah uses M.M. Thomas's Syrian Christian identity as a reason to reject Thomas's theology as irrelevant for Dalits. Yet how realistic is Azariah's charge against Thomas? Can a person be accurately judged merely upon the history of his/her faith tradition? This warrants a brief investigation into Thomas's own reflections upon the history of the Syrian Christian community in India, and specifically the Mar Thoma tradition to which Thomas belonged.

Certainly the historicity of the Syrian Christian tradition in India is complex. Indeed Azariah's broad stereotype of this tradition fails to acknowledge the historical tensions and theological shifts that have taken place within this tradition. Currently three main traditions attributed to the Syrian Christian community may be identified; the Orthodox Jacobite Church;²³ the Roman affiliated Church;²⁴ the Mar Thoma Church.²⁵ M.M. Thomas was a member of the Mar Thoma Church, which emerged as an independent denomination through the reforming influence of the C.M.S. missionaries on the Syrian Christian community.²⁶

The dismissal of M.M. Thomas based upon his identity as a Syrian Christian demonstrates, I suggest, a weakness in Azariah's exclusive methodology, for it fails to reflect Thomas's own critical reflection upon his own tradition. Indeed Thomas accepts that the Syrian Christian community in the context of history had been 'caste-ridden to a lamentable extent.'²⁷ Charter privileges granted by the King of

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The Orthodox Jacobite Church recognises the spiritual supremacy of the Jacobite Patriarch of Antioch, while for all practical purposes remains independent and autonomous. C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, p. 2

²⁴ Due to pressure from Rome during the sixteenth century, in particular through Portuguese presence in the South West of India, many Syrian Christians were united with Rome, creating the first of many schisms in the Syrian Christian community. Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, London: Methuen & Co., 1968, pp. 359-388

²⁵ The Mar Thoma Church emerged from the reformed tradition and acknowledges no official connection to the ancient foreign See of the East. Other minor sections of the Syrian Christian community include a small community belonging to the Chaldean Church in Trissur, Kerala, under a residing Nestorian Bishop, and an independent Church at Thozhiyoor which is in full communion with the Mar Thoma Church. C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, p. 3

²⁶ Jesudas M. Athyal, "Identity and Mission: Mar Thomas Church in the 21st Century", *Dharma Deepika*, July-December, 2001, p. 22

²⁷ C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, p. 106

Venad to the Syrian Christian community in the 9th Century included acquisition and protection of land, the granting of social privilege, and control of overland and sea-borne trading.²⁸ F.E. Keay writes: “The effect of the special positions which these privileges conferred upon them was that they were practically recognized by the Hindu rulers as forming a high caste.”²⁹ With such caste privilege, Syrian Christians became imbued with the same attitudes as caste Hindus, causing them to look down upon lower caste groups.³⁰ C.P. Mathew and M.M. Thomas note in their book, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*:

Among the Syrian Christians until the modern period there was little consciousness of the Church as owing a service or a prophetic ministry to the larger society of the neighbourhood. The Church was identical with the Syrian Christian community; for a long period they considered themselves as having a status similar of that of the high caste groups in the Hindu social hierarchy, and for this reason they followed caste customs and conformed to the caste-system, including the untouchability and unapproachability of the outcaste groups.³¹

Thomas suggests, in terms resonantly similar to Azariah, that socially exclusive casteism and lack of missionary zeal were mutually dependent factors which resulted in little concern for low caste and outcaste communities.³² The Syrian Christian community was not concerned with evangelical or social outreach beyond the confines of their communal group, demonstrating the “iron-grip which the caste system had over the people of India, not excluding the Syrian Christians, until recently.”³³ Thomas confesses that in order to uphold their social status in the midst of the Hindu population, the Syrian Christian community failed to proclaim the Gospel to the ‘downcast, the depressed and oppressed’, and sought to reject converts

²⁸ F.E. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India*, 2nd Edition, Madras: SPCK in India, 1951, p. 23

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 24

³⁰ C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *The Indian Churches of Saint Thomas*, pp. 24-25

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 156

³² *Ibid.*, p. 25. Thomas quotes F.E. Keay: “While jealously guarding their social privileges they [Syrian Christians] became indifferent to the spread of the Gospel, and for centuries spiritual life was at a low ebb amongst them.” See, F.E. Keay, *A History of the Syrian Church in India*, 2nd Edition, Madras: SPCK in India, 1951, p. 24

³³ C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 107

from these communities.³⁴ Thomas surely agrees with Azariah when he notes this as a 'heavy indictment indeed'.³⁵

Tracing the history of the Mar Thoma tradition, Thomas confesses that progress has been slow in breaking caste communal barriers and attitudes towards the lower castes and Dalits. The influence of the C.M.S. missionaries during the nineteenth century, however, caused a shift in the theological outlook of the Mar Thoma Christians. In 1857 the missionaries resolved to allow converts from the 'slave castes' to be introduced to the Churches and stand in equal footing with other Church members.³⁶ Initially the Syrian Christian response was negative, with instances of members exiting through the windows of the Church once the Scheduled castes converts entered through the doors.³⁷ Eventually, however, the traditional understanding of the Church as an exclusive caste community began to shift. The C.M.S. missionaries challenged the Church to ask new questions concerning the mission and service of the Church. The Syrians Christians, Thomas suggests, were awakened to three theological truths; a) that the Church exists for spreading the Gospel to all people, irrespective of their caste status; b) that the Church has a special responsibility to serve and uplift the poor and the depressed; c) that the Church has a spiritual unity in Christ which transcends all caste division.³⁸ This was significant for the Mar Thoma Church for it introduced for the first time,

[a] new tension between Church and Community, between the spiritual equality of all in Christ and the inequalities of society, between the humanism of the Gospel and the intolerable indignities perpetrated on the lowly in the caste hierarchy. In spite of the religious pietism therefore, the Mission introduced the truth that the Church is in one sense a challenge to the existing social structure.³⁹

Jesudas M. Athyal, Professor in the Department of Dalit Theology at Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, observes significant paradigm shifts in the Mar Thoma tradition as a result of reformation and spiritual revival, resulting in an

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 77

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79

³⁹ *Ibid.*

‘evangelical fervour’ and ‘ecumenical openness’ which served to radically change the character of the Church.⁴⁰ The founding of the Mar Thoma Evangelistic Association,⁴¹ and the Maramon spiritual Convention, bear witness to the spiritual fervour emerging in the Mar Thoma church in the twentieth century.⁴² These developments critically challenged the theological sanction of communal exclusivism.⁴³ The establishment of the Kerala Youth Christian Council of Action in 1939 represented an organized challenge for committed and responsible Christian action in society. Slow progress indeed, yet these were attempts to make amends for an ‘age-long failure’, resulting in evangelistic preaching of the Gospel to Scheduled caste groups as well as assistance in promoting educational and economic opportunities within Dalit communities.⁴⁴ It is important to note that the M.M. Thomas was nurtured as a theologian through his involvement with the Youth Christian Council of Action, as well as through his involvement in the Student Christian Council.⁴⁵ Thomas’s theology was thus nurtured in a dynamic environment which asked probing new questions of faith and Christian responsibility beyond the narrow confines of static tradition.

Despite these significant shifts taking place within his own tradition, however, it is important to note that Thomas remained sharply critical. While acknowledging signs of reform, separate worshipping communities based on caste identity highlighted for M.M. Thomas that the Church had been unable to move to a fellowship transcending social and caste barriers.⁴⁶ It is a sad admission, he writes, that,

[t]hough the first converts from the Scheduled Castes to the Mar Thoma Church and the Mar Thoma Syrian Christians were living in the same region, Central Travancore, the ‘new Christians’ had to be organized into ‘*puthusabhas*’ (new churches) separately from

⁴⁰ Jesudas Athyal, *op. cit.*, p. 21

⁴¹ Founded in 1888

⁴² Jesudas Athyal, *op. cit.*, p. 23

⁴³ C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 156

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106

⁴⁵ Godwin Shiri, *Christian Social Thought in India, 1962-1977*, Madras: CLS, 1982, p. 8. T. Jacob Thomas, *Ethics of a World Community: Contributions of Dr. M.M. Thomas*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993, pp. 28-33

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 156; M.M. Thomas, “Social Reform among Indian Christians”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXIX, no. 4, December, 1982, p. 53

the Syrians, with separate places of worship...It was made necessary because the Syrian Christians, or at least a good many of them, would not allow the new converts to worship with them in their churches until very recent times.⁴⁷

The realisation of fellowship transcending social barriers even within worship, Thomas lamented, was far from complete.⁴⁸

The issue of caste within the Church, of course, is not limited to the Mar Thoma Syrian tradition. Indeed, as an ecumenical theologian Thomas had a wider conception of the Church beyond denominationalism. Thomas was deeply conscious that the Church across India was organized along caste and class lines.⁴⁹ Earlier in the century, writes Thomas, C.F. Andrews had observed that the Church in India had again and again turned away from Christ in compromising with caste, resulting in deep stagnation. The Church, Andrews argued, would only succeed if she refused to harbour within her own fold the evils of caste.⁵⁰ Since then, notes M.M. Thomas, the situation had become worse. The tragedy, he writes,

[i]s that Christians in India have no sense of tragedy about the widespread prevalence of caste in the life of the Church. They seem to have settled down to a Christianity which is no more than an ethnic or caste cult. And there is little prophetic ministry within the Church, to stimulate self-criticism and repentance. The Revival preachers are plenty. But they only promote a cult of spirituality which is unrelated to the transformation of social relationships.⁵¹

There are two criticisms of the Church here. The first is the prevalence of Christian communalism, and the second a criticism of the lop-sided emphasis on personal piety unconcerned with the transformation of social relationships within the wider society. Based upon this reality Thomas called the Church to repent, bearing witness to a Christ-centred fellowship in the wider community of persons transcending caste and cultural divisions.

⁴⁷ C. P. Matthew & M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 107

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 157

⁴⁹ See, M.M. Thomas, "Fellowship in Christ: The Gospel for Contemporary India", Article written for the St. Thomas centenary celebrations, August 3, 1972, Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁵⁰ Quoted in, M.M. Thomas, "The Transcendent Satyagraha of God", *The Guardian*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 1, January 1, 1970, p. 3

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

M.M. Thomas was opposed both to the formation of Christian Mission compounds and the separate formation of Christian congregations based on *jati* groupings. The Mission compounds uprooted Christians from their traditional cultural roots, effectively turning the Christian community into an exclusive communal caste group as oppose to an open fellowship within the wider society.⁵² He was also critical, in agreement with the National Christian Council of India, of the formation of separate congregations within the same village, a practice which was deemed to have ‘no justification’ and was a ‘radical denial of the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which transcends such divisions.’⁵³ As an example, Thomas cites the example of Andra Pradesh, where the creation of separate *Mala* and the *Madiga* Dalit Church congregations merely reinforced strained division between the two communities.

It is clear that Thomas stands opposed to the caste system and the prevalence of caste within the Christian churches of India. It is argued, therefore, that Azariah’s dismissal of Thomas as a ‘Syrian Christian’ inadequately reflects Thomas’s criticism of the Syrian Christian and Mar Thoma tradition, and Thomas’s rejection of caste system and casteism within the churches of India. While Azariah rightly condemns the historic caste communalism of the Syrian Christian community, including prejudicial attitudes towards the lower caste and outcaste communities, he does not allow for the fact that Thomas also laments this historical reality. The inability to critically remove the man from the tradition demonstrates a weakness in Azariah’s methodological exclusivism. Indeed, Azariah’s attempt to fit M.M. Thomas’s theology rigidly into the Syrian Christian tradition fails to acknowledge Thomas’s commitment to the wider ecumenical theological movement. This commitment, based upon a theological understanding of the Lordship of Christ, highlights Thomas’s attempts to move beyond the limits of denominationalism and religious communalism. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter V as I

⁵² M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation, Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Madras: CLS, 1971, p. 13; M.M. Thomas, “Social Reform among Indian Christians”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXIX, No. 4, December, 1982, p. 58

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 58

examine Thomas's ecclesiology and his thoughts on the relation between Church, State and pluralistic society.

4.2. M.M. Thomas: A Brahminical theologian?

Bishop Azariah's second criticism is that M.M. Thomas is a 'Brahminical thinker' bound within a 'Brahminical mindset'. From a methodologically exclusive standpoint, Azariah's dismissal of M.M. Thomas certainly has strategic effect. Thomas is effectively dismissed for being non-Dalit! This point becomes relevant to this thesis when Azariah substantiates his comments theologically. Azariah acknowledges Thomas's contribution to the realm of theological anthropology, in particular his classification 'dehumanisation' and 'humanisation' to help understand the human quest for full humanity in Christ. Yet in classifying Thomas as a Brahminical thinker, Azariah asserts that Thomas excluded Dalits from his theological reflections on humanisation.⁵⁴ The Brahminical concept of the human, Azariah observes, is essentially based upon relationship to the divine:

The Aryan-Brahminical explanation that God is the source of Human family could not be resisted by the...original people of this land. It was claimed that the Brahmins came from the head of Brahma, the creator, Kshatriyas from his body, the Vaisyas from the thighs and the Sudras from his feet. But very subtly and deceptively, the fifth section of the population was left out as having nothing to do with God as their source.⁵⁵

In other words, Azariah argues that the 'Brahminical mindset' fails to acknowledge Dalits as being in ontological relationship to the divine creator. Without this essential ontological relationship, Dalits by definition exist beyond the parameters of what it means to be truly human. Azariah argues that Thomas's theological reflections on humanisation essentially exclude the Dalits based upon a Brahminical understanding of the human being.⁵⁶ Azariah criticises Thomas's failure to appreciate the reality of a third category, the 'sub-humanised', those who are

⁵⁴ Interview, Bishop Azariah.

⁵⁵ M. Azariah, *The Un-Christian Side of the Christian Church*, p. 12

⁵⁶ Interview, Bishop Azariah.

considered *less* than human.⁵⁷ For Azariah, the ‘dehumanised’ in India *created* the category of ‘sub-human’ through the structures of caste system.⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, Azariah continues, is able to conceptualize the reality of ‘dehumanisation’ as a result of sin, but is *unable* to conceptualize the category of sub-human.⁵⁹

It is interesting to note that Bishop Devasahayam played down Azariah’s use of the term sub-humanised as a matter of semantics.⁶⁰ It must also be added that Azariah himself is inconsistent in his use of the terms ‘sub-humanised’ and ‘dehumanised’. He writes: “We see the Kingdom of God with Jesus as the King, which stands for humanising all the people who are dehumanised by others (sinned against) and sub-humanised by their own making (as sinners).”⁶¹ Here Azariah suggests that the sub-humanised are the sinners by their own making, while the dehumanised are the sinned against, contra to his use of the terms above. Elsewhere, dehumanized and sub-humanised are used synonymously.⁶² At other times Azariah does not use the term sub-humanised at all, preferring to use the term ‘dehumanised’ for the Dalit predicament. For example, in reference to the issue of separate identity in Indian society, Azariah comments that Dalits face “certain dehumanising debilities like untouchability [and] social degradation with no possibility of social mobility for upwards status.”⁶³ Indeed one of Bishop Azariah’s Gurukul devotions is entitled “Ministry to the ‘Dehumanised’ Rural Masses”, in which he hopes for a transformation of the “dehumanised millions of Dalit brothers and sister in our country today.”⁶⁴ Based upon the irregularity with which Azariah himself uses these terms, it seems harsh to be critical of Thomas for failing to use the term sub-humanised in his theological reflections.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ I posed Azariah’s comment during a second informal meeting with Bishop Devasahayam, December, 2005

⁶¹ M. Azariah, “The event of a Man Born Blind”, *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 59

⁶² M. Azariah, “Introduction”, *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. xvii

⁶³ M. Azariah, “The Indian Church and Dalit Liberation”, *Christ and Dalit Liberation*, Madras: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1987, p. 11

⁶⁴ M. Azariah, “Ministry to the ‘Dehumanised’ Rural Masses”, *Gurukul Daily Devotion - 2003*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 2003, p. 253

In one respect, Azariah directly supports my research hypothesis, for he affirms the significance of Thomas's reflections upon humanisation as relevant to Dalit Christian discourse. Of course, without fully conceptualising the 'sub-human' Dalit position, Azariah argues that Thomas's contribution requires essential refinement based on Dalit contextual specificity. Yet in accepting this point, are we to concede that M.M. Thomas *excluded* Dalits from his conceptual and theological understanding of humanisation? I argue that Thomas essentially *included* Dalits in his ecumenical theological reflections, and was, therefore, not bound within a Brahminic mindset, as Azariah argues. As I proceed to investigate Thomas's reflections upon caste, class and power, this significant point will be substantiated. Thomas certainly approved of the emerging Dalit movement in the latter part of the twentieth century, writing to the editor of *Dalit Voice* to demonstrate his support for the Dalit struggle: "Whenever I get *Dalit Voice* I read the editorial and other items with great interest. I appreciate the manner in which you carry on the struggle."⁶⁵

It is perhaps overstating Thomas's position to suggest he could fully grasp the concept of 'sub-humanisation' as expressed by Azariah. Certainly Thomas's thoughts require enrichment from the perspective of particular Dalit contexts and experiences. Indeed, in light of Thomas's desire to seek a living theology challengingly relevant to the people, one cannot help feel that this is exactly what Thomas would have wanted.

5. The Theological Influence of M.M. Thomas

5.1. Humanisation, Liberation and Conscientisation

M.M. Thomas's theological reflections upon salvation and humanisation clearly influenced Azariah, who writes:

Jesus declared that He came as a shepherd so that His sheep may have 'life and have it more abundantly' (John 10:10). What does that mean? It means life for all: A life that is not reduced by hunger and poverty, a life that is not exploited by others nor

⁶⁵ M.M. Thomas, "Letter to the Editor", V.T. Rajshekar, ed. *Dalit Voice*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, Vol. 2, No. 8, 1-15 February, 1983, p. 9

oppressed, a life that is not deprived of daily necessities, nor deprived of self-dignity and basic human rights. Jesus came to ensure every man and every woman and every child a life that is not dehumanised nor sub-humanised but uplifted to be genuinely human. Indeed, *Humanization* is the basic content of *salvation* that Jesus offers to man (cf. Dr. M.M. Thomas' book, 'Salvation and Humanization', CLS, Madras – 1977).⁶⁶

Beyond the reference to Thomas itself, clear elements of resonance are clearly apparent. 'Humanisation' is understood as relating to the shift from a state of de-humanisation (or 'sub-humanisation') to a state of becoming 'genuinely human'. Abundant life is understood as life for all, including self-dignity, human rights, and freedom from hunger, poverty, exploitation and oppression. 'Salvation' is thus interpreted as essentially and integrally related to humanisation.

Writing on the theme 'Peace and Human Rights', Bishop Azariah identifies three significant and inter-related concepts relevant for Dalit theology: Humanisation, Liberation, and Conscientisation.⁶⁷ Azariah suggests that 'Humanisation' relates to human dignity and social equality, affirming "the God-given human dignity and basic human rights for those that are denied by their society."⁶⁸ The term 'liberation' is used in reference to Latin American liberation theology, which called for liberation of the people from multifaceted oppression and exploitation, including freedom from socio-economic exploitation and poverty.⁶⁹ Azariah uses the term 'conscientisation' in reference to Latin American social scientist Paulo Freire, who understood liberation to be closely related to a process of conscientisation, building "critical awareness in the exploited poor people."⁷⁰ Each of these concepts is considered by Azariah to be relevant to the Indian context of Dalit oppression.

Of particular significance for our purpose here is Azariah's appreciation for M.M. Thomas's endeavour to bring each of these concepts into the fore of theological debate within Indian. Azariah writes: "Now, these same approaches of

⁶⁶ M. Azariah, "Five Bible Studies on Christian Witness", *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, p. 33

⁶⁷ M. Azariah, "Peace and Human Rights", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 104

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 105

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* See, Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Seabury Press, 1970

Humanisation, Liberation and Conscientisation are well explained as being appropriate for application and adoption in India by Dr. M.M. Thomas in his book, 'Salvation and Humanisation' and other writings."⁷¹ The reference demonstrates Azariah's confidence in Thomas's theological reflections on humanisation, liberation and conscientisation as appropriate for the Indian context, *including* Dalit theology. Theological resonance between Thomas and Azariah at this point is clearly evident.

Bishop Azariah's concern for humanisation, liberation and conscientisation indicates that his theology may be appropriately located within the 'caste-class-power' nexus. While the 'caste' factor remains the predominant concern, Azariah's writings reflect a diversity of Dalit issues and concerns. Liberation from the multi-faceted face of poverty is a dominant theme in much of his writing, and conscientisation is discussed in relation to power, or *powerlessness* of Dalits suffering from a 'wounded psyche'.⁷² Although Azariah believed the cumulative effect of caste system demanded attention on the central atrocity of caste-discrimination, so too was there a demand to address issues of class injustice and the reality of 'utter powerlessness' resulting from Dalit 'marginalisation and enslavement'.⁷³ Indian society, he notes, is not a monolithic, unicultural society, but rather: "a society with infinite variety and plurality of economic, social cultural, religious, linguistic and even political patterns and complexities."⁷⁴ In agreement with Nirmal, he suggests that socio-cultural discrimination and economic and political deprivation are two sides of the same coin, demanding that a multi-pronged approach be sought in the struggle towards Dalit emancipation.⁷⁵ Succinctly put, Bishop Azariah affirms with John C.B. Webster that "the special burdens of the

⁷¹ M. Azariah, "Peace and Human Rights", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 104

⁷² See, M. Azariah, "Poverty and Victims of Caste"; "A Theology of Poverty and Mission"; "Dalit Issue: The Wounded Psyche", found in *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000

⁷³ M. Azariah, "Towards a More radical Approach to Dalit Liberation", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, pp.162-163

⁷⁴ M. Azariah, "The Church and its Development Ministry", *Witnessing in India Today*, p. 69

⁷⁵ M. Azariah, "Emerging Dalit Theologies", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 181

Depressed Classes have been social stigma, poverty and powerlessness” resulting from Indian caste.⁷⁶

It is within this nexus that the influence of M.M. Thomas upon the theology of Bishop Azariah will be discussed. Although Thomas acknowledged that the relation between power and the forces of caste, class and religion had not been adequately investigated,⁷⁷ he was conscious of the inter-related nature of each factor. Influenced by the thoughts of social activist Ram Manohar Lohia, who maintained that social development within the Indian context must be a simultaneous struggle against economic exploitation, social oppression and religious fatalism,⁷⁸ Thomas writes: “No doubt, material poverty is closely linked with traditional religious ethos, value systems, traditional social institutions and power structures, and therefore cannot be fought in isolation from them. Mass poverty and struggle against mass poverty are both interdependent with cultural ethos, social ideology and religious faith.”⁷⁹ For theology to be challengingly relevant to the Indian people, Thomas believed it must take place in the midst of the dynamic and changing realities of Indian context, a factor which demanded that theology be conducted within a caste-class-power nexus.

For the purpose of analysis, I shall investigate attitudes towards caste, class and power separately, while conscious that each is integrally linked. It is argued that both Thomas and Azariah theologically, a) reject the inequality and social hierarchy of the caste system as directly opposed to divinely created humanity; b) call for individual and social transformation leading to liberation of the oppressed from unjust socio-economic and political oppression; c) acknowledge that consientisation of human identity and dignity becomes a tool of empowerment towards individual and social transformation.

⁷⁶ M. Azariah, “Dalit Problem is not Poverty but Denial of Human Rights”, *Dalit Voice*, Vol. 13, No. 23, October 16-31, 1983

⁷⁷ M.M. Thomas, “Indian Christian Theology, the Church and the People”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXX, Nos. 3&4, September-December, 1983, pp. 74-75

⁷⁸ M.M. Thomas, “Spiritual Penetration: Revolts of the Poor and the Oppressed”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, March, 1980, p. 18

⁷⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Promotion of World Development Services and the Problem of Relationships”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 3, September, 1972, p. 36

5.2. Caste

In this section M.M. Thomas's theological attitude to caste and caste system will be examined, arguing that Thomas stood theologically opposed to traditional caste-based society and the dehumanizing manifestations of a society founded upon hierarchical religio-economic and cultural inequality. Two words of caution are merited, however, before I begin. Azariah quotes Paul Gueriveera, who wrote:

Even the most intellectual including those who declare themselves to be enemies of the caste system are often entirely prejudiced and consciously or unconsciously act in a manner which gives lease of life to the caste system. Both, by force of inherited habit and training imparted to an individual, he feels a deep loyalty to the caste groups.⁸⁰

This quote reminds us of the potential dangers in overstating the case for Thomas. It is important to note that Thomas did not write a theology specifically addressed to caste and caste system. Indeed his theological writings cover a wide range of issues and concerns, leaving him open to criticism for being too broad and lacking specificity in relation to Dalit related issues.⁸¹ Certainly the caste system *per se* was not a major concern in his writings. Yet in his theological vision for a transformed Indian society based upon the principles of common humanity, we gain valuable insight into his views on traditional Indian structures and the caste system. This investigation will demonstrate that M.M. Thomas did not exclude Dalits from his theological reflections, and that he rejected the caste system that had denied individuality, dignity and social equality to Dalits.

A second caution stems from the first. A vision of 'new society' which fails to recognize the power of traditional hegemonic forces must be judged with deep suspicion. Saral K. Chatterji rightly observes the strength of traditional forces in the modern Indian era:

[T]he outstanding features of India's traditional social equilibrium...indicates that it is doubtful that any fundamental change can be brought about by forces internal to the system. Thus

⁸⁰ M. Azariah, "Poverty and Victims of Caste", *A Pastors Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 76. See, Paul Gueriveera, "Approach to Social Analysis – India 1988", *Jivan*, Jesuit Journal of South Asia, September, 1988

⁸¹ This caution was made by Dr. Mohan Razu during a discussion on M.M. Thomas with Dalit students at UTC, Bangalore.

the absence of a powerful ideology of change has prevented human progress in India for centuries. For the bulk of the Indian people this has meant a vice like grip over their personality maintained both on the psychological as well as social levels by the predominant religious and social ethic. In both political allocation of power and responsibility, and the economic allocation of scarce resources, the Indian society has maintained a rigid concentration in the upper echelons of the social hierarchy.⁸²

We cannot, therefore, simply assume that Thomas is opposed to hegemonic forces of caste-class hierarchy merely because he seeks a ‘new vision’ for Indian society. Indeed the vision for new society must be more than ‘new wine in old skins’ if we are to make a case that Thomas opposed traditional structures of caste. Yet Thomas is aware of such a caution. He is conscious of the power of traditional hegemonic forces adapting themselves within the shifting Indian context, and cautions against too great an optimism in the breakdown of the caste system. Indeed, he observes that the “hold of the demons will resist social changes.”⁸³ Although disagreeing with the authors of *Caste in Changing India*, who maintained that the caste system had withstood the changes in modern India, Thomas cautioned that casteism may become a, “many headed *Rakshasa* who grows new heads as soon as the old one gets chopped off.”⁸⁴ The strength of the ‘caste-spirit’, he continues, still has a powerful hold on the Indian people.⁸⁵

M.M. Thomas is thus aware of the potential for the ‘demons of caste’ to re-emerge in new forms within modern India,⁸⁶ although his use of the term ‘caste-spirit’ has been rightly challenged by Dalit theologians. Dr. Mohan Razu emphatically dismisses the term ‘caste-spirit’ for failing to appreciate the reality of physical and material oppression of Dalit men and women in present day Indian

⁸² Saral K. Chatterji, “Towards a Revolutionary Transformation of Society”, Richard W. Taylor, ed. *Religion and Society: The First Twenty-five Years, 1953-1978*, Madras: CLS, 1982, p. 159

⁸³ M.M. Thomas, et al. “Caste, Class and Power-Structure”, Editorial, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, September, 1974, p. 1

⁸⁴ M.M. Thomas, “Caste in Changing India”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XII, No. 2, June, 1965, pp. 94-95

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95

society.⁸⁷ This is a significant point which necessarily challenges Thomas's use of the term. Yet it is clear that Thomas's concern for the re-emergence of caste 'demons' reflects, significantly, a concern for the impact this has on the weaker sections of Indian society, including the Dalits. He writes: "since Independence caste in new combinations with class got more entrenched in the power-structures and ideology of society and state, making the life of the weaker sections of society (the scheduled castes and landless labourers) more intolerable."⁸⁸

M.M. Thomas was conscious that the caste system had "enslaved one fifth of the people of India as outcasts for several centuries."⁸⁹ This enslavement he viewed as multi-dimensional, incorporating religio-economic, social and cultural totality of Indian life. He understood the caste system to be a sociological construct rooted in Indian spirituality and given the sanction of religion: "[T]he common usage of the term the demon of caste, points towards the truth that caste and allied structures are more than sociological in character, that they have spiritual roots, and they have the sanction of traditional religion."⁹⁰ Given the reality of its spiritual underpinnings and the rigid socio-economic and cultural manifestations of the caste system, Thomas understood liberation in Christ to be essentially holistic, relevant to the socio-religious, sacred-secular realm of India.

5.2.1. Human Individuality and Community

The crucial issue for contemporary Indian society, writes Bishop Azariah, is not the caste system *per se* but rather the "spiritual inequality issuing from the religious notion of caste, which is the root cause of all cumulative inequalities in society."⁹¹ This experience of inequality resulting from caste discrimination has

⁸⁷ The most emphatic voice against the concept of 'spirit of caste' came from Dr. John Mohan Razu during a visit we made together to Chennai. This response, although somewhat less angered, was common among many of the Dalit Christian theologians I met.

⁸⁸ M.M. Thomas, "Caste, Class and Power-Structure", p. 1

⁸⁹ M.M. Thomas, "A Spirituality for Combat", Sermon preached at Princeton Seminary, December 8, 1983, Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁹⁰ Paul Devanandan & M.M. Thomas, ed. *Christian Participation in Nation-Building*, Bangalore: NCCI & CISRS, 1960, p. 150; M.M. Thomas, "Caste, Class and Power-Structure", p. 1

⁹¹ M. Azariah, "Christ and Dalit Liberation", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 142

individual and community implications, a reality which violates the fact that human beings are created in the image of God:

[t]his principle of hierarchy is the very negation and opposite principle that is inherent in human nature because human beings were all created in the 'image' and likeness' of the Creator God, as it is affirmed in the Biblical Tradition (Genesis 1&2). Thus, the oppressive and negative principle of hierarchy, naturally denies any inherent equality of status to individual and groups of human communities – particularly to the vulnerable ethnic minorities who have been rendered powerless victims of historical conquest and subjugation and made victims of violations of their basic human rights by the majority group claiming racial or caste or class based superiority over the minorities like in the case of Dalits in India for instance.⁹²

Essentially, caste hierarchy has denied to individuals and communities their God-given humanity and dignity, rendering them powerless socially, economically, culturally, politically, and spiritually.⁹³ The Dalit goal, therefore, demands the “total emancipation of every Dalit victim of a) enslavement b) oppression and c) deprivation as in individuals, as families and as Ethnic social groups” within their particular context.⁹⁴ As the experience of Dalit oppression is both individual and collective, so too must liberation be interpreted in individual and collective terms. Azariah notes that the love and justice of God seeks to preserve the sanctity of dignity and worth of every individual human being made in the image of God.⁹⁵ Yet this is not a call for radical individualism giving primacy to the individual over the collective group.⁹⁶ Indeed he affirms that humans are not made as isolated individuals, but rather in community for the purpose of interpersonal relationship.⁹⁷ Liberation is ultimately a call for restoring the total health of the sub-humanised

⁹² M. Azariah, “Ecumenism from the Perspective of the Marginalised”, Vinod Victor, *et al.*, eds. *Ecumenism: Prospects and Challenges*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2001, pp. 206-7

⁹³ M. Azariah, “Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation”, *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 165

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Azariah refers to Genesis 2 and Psalm 8. M. Azariah, “Injustice and Discrimination Against Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin”, *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 17

⁹⁶ Andrew Heywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd Edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 27

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17

Dalit masses, holding together in essential tension the needs of the individual and the community.⁹⁸

M.M. Thomas stood theologically opposed to the graded inequality of caste hierarchy, rejecting it as a denial of the true nature of both individuality and community life in Christ. He viewed caste as an obstacle to human freedom, equality, creativity, justice and dignity, and thus as a system opposed to the divine purpose of God for human community in Christ. This rejection of caste based hierarchy and inequality is rooted in Thomas's theological reflections upon Creation and the nature of true humanity in Christ. Here, Thomas's theological reflections find significant resonance with Dalit theological protest against caste system.

In the post-Independence era, M.M. Thomas was optimistic about the building of a modern and just Indian society, and convinced that Christianity could essentially contribute to the quest for new spiritual foundations upon which this society could be built.⁹⁹ He argues that static traditional and communal Indian structures of caste reinforcing 'group-tyranny and inequality' must give way to more dynamic institutions which had underpinnings of a new spirit of justice.¹⁰⁰ Thomas was conscious, however, that radical restructuring of political, economic and social institutions alone would be inadequate, and urged a 'new cultural ethos and a new spirituality' in order that justice may prevail.¹⁰¹ This was a vision for India shaped by an understanding of human personhood, extending beyond mechanical structures to incorporate the spiritual nature of persons-in-community, founded on the principle of human equality and dignity offered in Christ.

5.2.1.1. Individuality

For the vision of a transformed society to be successful, Thomas considered the break-up of the traditional institution of caste imperative:

People have been content to live in conformity with the traditional customs and to live as functions of the traditional group, whether

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.165

⁹⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Search for a New Humanism", T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, p. 108

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

family, tribe, clan, caste or village. They have done so because group customs were sanctioned by religion. Today men and women have become conscious of the fundamental rights to individuality and demand the freedom of non-conformity. The discovery of individual personality and its freedom in State, Society and Religion is a dynamic for radical social change.¹⁰²

Individuality is considered by Thomas an essential component of human personality, creating a sense of non-conformity from state, society and religion, which in turn becomes a dynamic for radical social transformation. Thomas viewed the emergence of secularism positively, for it allowed,

[t]he liberation of the individual who has hitherto remained submerged in the collective structures; it is good as it means men's awakening to a new sense of equality between man and man irrespective of sex, caste, or creed and to the new understanding of justice....It weakens religious and caste communalism and makes possible community based on common humanity.¹⁰³

Individuality, for Thomas, frees the individual from suppressive traditional collective structures, awakening in the individual a sense of equality regardless of caste, gender or religious creed. Caste denial of individuality thus directly contravened the concept of true personhood and must therefore be rejected as unjust.¹⁰⁴ Awareness of human individuality becomes the basis for dynamic change, for religious and caste communalism becomes weakened as a result of a new sense of justice, paving the way for a new vision of social transformation based upon the principles of common humanity.

While M.M. Thomas does not make specific reference here to the Dalits or to the Dalit situation, his theological reflections on the nature of human individuality clearly stand opposed to the reality of human inequality and identity determined by the caste system. Dalit theology strongly reflects Thomas's demand for recognition of human individuality denied by caste system. Based upon the preamble of the

¹⁰² M.M. Thomas, "Patterns of Modern Man's search for Salvation", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No. 2, June, 1964, p. 10

¹⁰³ M.M. Thomas, "Secularism of Society", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 9, September, 1959, p. 333

¹⁰⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Church as the Servant of Society", *The Church and Society*, Madras: CLS, 1962, p. 3

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, James Massey affirms the equal and inalienable rights of all members of humanity founded upon the principles of freedom, justice and peace.¹⁰⁵ In the Indian context, Massey argues, individuality is stifled, restricting human attempts at personal growth and denying the rights of freedom, equality and peace because the Indian social order is primarily based on class or *Varna* rather than on the individual:

In this social order, a unit is not the *individual* Brahman or the *individual* Kshtriya or the *individual* Vaisya of the *individual* Shudra or the *individual* untouchables (Dalits)...In a nutshell, in a society based on Brahminical social order, there is no room for individual merit and no consideration of individual justice. If an individual has a privilege or right, it is not because it is due to him/her personally: here such privileges are linked with the caste and class only. Similarly, if an individual suffers from a certain wrong, it is because he/she belongs to a particular caste or class. This is the basic reason behind the structural violence that the Dalits in India are faced with, because they have been declared by the caste people outside the purview of their 'created' caste based society, which automatically denies them their human rights.¹⁰⁶

The concept of individuality is thus acknowledged as a central theological concern for both M.M. Thomas and first generation Dalit theologians.

5.2.1.2. Community Liberation

In chapter I of this thesis, the concern of Dalit theology for the liberation of the oppressed 'community' beyond the individual was noted. As John C.B. Webster affirms, 'solidarity' as opposed to individualism is the driving concern of Dalit theology.¹⁰⁷ While the individual is caught in the shackles of outcaste identity, so too is Dalit community caught in the 'straight jacket' of a hegemonic caste system. Dalit theology is ultimately concerned for the liberation of the holistic community of

¹⁰⁵ James Massey, *Another World is Possible: Dalit Perspectives on Human Rights, Globalisation & Just Society*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit Studies, 2004, p. 1

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ John C.B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation: An Examination of Perspectives*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2002, p. 65

oppressed Dalits. Indeed, Bishop Azariah frequently juxtaposes the terms ‘individual’ and ‘community’ in his writings.¹⁰⁸

While M.M. Thomas deemed individuality a critical element of ‘humanness’, he cautioned against a utopian individualism, emphasizing that the individual is created as a social being in community relationship. Thus an individual seeking an end detrimental to the community violates Thomas’s understanding of true human personhood.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, Thomas considers the human being as a social being whose existence finds fulfilment in society as a “community of free and equal persons in relations of responsibility to each other”.¹¹⁰ Once a person establishes a sense of individuality, he continues, “man knows himself to be a person with a radical centre of responsible decision transcending society, though involved in it and continuing to be shaped by it”.¹¹¹ Human individuality is thus essentially oriented to social equality, fraternity and justice:¹¹²

It means that personal liberty finds its fulfilment in the mutual responsibility of a community of persons, all equal as persons, and all having equal social opportunities of liberty and opportunities of development. A community of interpersonal responsibility in love is the final goal of personal self-awareness, self-determination and self-direction. Radical personal individuality and community of persons are thus two sides of the same coin.¹¹³

The theological concept of *person-in-community* safeguards for Thomas the dual problem of traditional collectivism and atomic individualism, thus upholding the individual and collective dignity of human beings. This is indeed foundational to his theological insight into the nature of human personhood, and thus to his vision of a spiritual foundation for a transformed just and equal Indian society. He writes:

When personal individuality and personal community are not seen as upholding and fulfilling each other, the pendulum swings

¹⁰⁸ See for example, the interplay of ‘individual’ and ‘community’ concern as expressed in M. Azariah, “Introduction”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000.

¹⁰⁹ M.M. Thomas, “A Social Manifesto for the Church”, *The Guardian*, Madras: Hogarth Press, July 31, 1941

¹¹⁰ M.M. Thomas, “Search for a New Humanism”, T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, p. 109

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 110

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

between mechanical individualism and mechanical collectivism, both of which are devoid of the reverence for the personal dignity of man which is the basis for true justice to the humanity of man in modern society. And the result is that men are exploited and dehumanised.¹¹⁴

Humanisation for M.M. Thomas clearly demands recognition of human individuality, freedom and equality. The quest for life in abundance is a quest for true personhood, acknowledging both material and spiritual dimensions of human existence. As human personhood has an essential social dimension, there is recognition of human responsibility within a community of persons based not upon division and social hierarchy, but equality and dignity. Thus there is both an implicit and explicit rejection of caste based hierarchy and resulting discrimination in Thomas's theology. It is here that we may detect key points of resonance between the theology of M.M. Thomas and Bishop Azariah, supporting the thesis that Thomas contributed significant theological signposts relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology.

5.3. Class

Bishop Azariah asserts that caste is the primary factor determining Indian identity, affecting the life of every individual in the country.¹¹⁵ Yet he acknowledges, in line with the Vancouver Assembly of the World Council of Churches, that there are multifarious forms of oppression and injustice to be found in the Indian context, including class oppression.¹¹⁶ He argues that in the context of Indian society so transparently dominated by Hindu religious culture and hierarchical caste structure, poverty is the most visible manifestation of oppression for Dalits,¹¹⁷ thus establishing a clear link between class and caste:

Those who own an inordinately large share of the country's riches belong, by and large to the upper castes, on the other extreme the Scheduled castes and Scheduled tribes comprise 90% of those who live below the poverty line and a mass majority of the landless

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 111

¹¹⁵ M. Azariah, "The Indian Church and Dalit Liberation", *Christ and Dalit Liberation*, p. 3

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

labourers... Thus the bulk of the poor in the country consist of Agricultural landless labourers who also happen to be the Scheduled Castes (Dalits) and the Scheduled tribes.¹¹⁸

Liberation is thus essentially concerned with Dalit poverty, challenging class injustice manifest in a lack of land ownership and economic well being. The Dalit villager is “born into debt, lives in debt and bequeaths debt”.¹¹⁹ Indeed, the very structure of the Indian village provides testimony to the,

[u]gly and unbridgeable gap and division in every village in India that exists between the landless labour force, on the one hand living in segregated quarters in clusters and mud huts... and on the other hand those families of land owning class living in separate and secure homes with inherited wealth and properties living in cluster with communities engaged in other village trades, of a safe distance away from their servant class.¹²⁰

Certainly the question of economic and social deprivation is integrally related to humanisation, for it denies humanity and dignity, rendering Dalits powerless in social, economic, cultural, political, and spiritual terms.¹²¹

The reality of Dalit oppression demands, suggests K. Wilson, a ‘dialectical existentialism’, an awareness that the Dalit condition cannot be understood in purely spiritual or purely material terms but rather “existentially and dialectically at the same time.”¹²² M.M. Thomas was deeply concerned about the economic and social injustice prevalent within India society, particularly for the Dalits, women and tribals. There can be no talk of Christian vocation, he notes, “unless we are

¹¹⁸ M. Azariah, “Indian Situation Today and the Role of the Church in Justice Concerns”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 112

¹¹⁹ M. Azariah, “Mission in Christ’s Way through the Crucifixion and Resurrection”, *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, April, 1999, p. 58

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* Azariah offers statistics relating to the Dalit socio-economic plight: “Despite the compensatory discrimination accorded by the reservation benefits provided in the Constitution for Dalits over the past four long decades, the socio-economic condition of the Dalits has in fact deteriorated. For example...over 70% of the Dalits are living below the poverty line, whereas this percentage of non-Dalit population is 48%. While 82.5% of land in the country is owned by other caste groups and communities, only 7% of the land is owned by the Dalits who form 16.48% if the total population according to the census of 1981.” M. Azariah, “Dalit Problem is not Poverty but Denial of Human Rights”, *Dalit Voice*, Vol. 13, No. 23, October 16-31, 1984

¹²¹ M. Azariah, “Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 165

¹²² K. Wilson, “The Search for a Dalit Theology”, M.E. Prabhakar, ed. *Towards a Dalit Theology*, New Delhi: ISPCK, 1988, p. 39

possessed by the vision of Christ involved in the struggle of the people of India against ignorance, poverty, disease and oppression.”¹²³

Yet Thomas’s concern is not merely economic, political and social development, but a holistic liberation of person in society, both spiritual and material. Commentating on the Book of Exodus, Thomas asserts his position clearly. The Israelites, he notes, experienced ‘total slavery’ under Pharaoh, both in material and spiritual terms. The liberation initiated by God was thus a total liberation: “As the slavery was spiritual-social, so was the liberation.”¹²⁴ Liberation must thus be essentially spiritual and material, related to life in the world. Significantly, quoting the same Exodus passages, Azariah affirms God’s liberation as a liberation experienced holistically in the human spirit and the material world, concerned with emancipation from exploitation and slavery. There is a close link, Azariah argues, between the religion of Yahweh and the elimination of servitude among the people: “Man is created in the image and likeness of God...The exploitation and injustice implicit in poverty make work into something servile and dehumanising; alienated work, instead of liberating man, enslaves him even more.”¹²⁵

Both M.M. Thomas and Bishop Azariah affirm that humanisation is essentially concerned with liberation from worldly inequality, exploitation and servitude. This resonance is reinforced in their common interpretation of Psalm 144 (vrs. 9-15) as a vision for just human community within the context of the world. For Thomas, these verses imply that “divine salvation includes the welfare of the people and just relations among them.”¹²⁶ He continues:

God is concerned with not only our souls and spiritual salvation but also with the total needs of the community – with the health of the youth, with increase in productivity of food and other material needs of life and with development of the moral sense of sharing

¹²³ M.M. Thomas, “Vision and Vocation”, *AIKYA*, Bangalore: SCM in India, 1969, p. 6

¹²⁴ Thomas writes that when Moses told the people of God’s plan for their liberation, “they would not listen to him, because their spirit had been broken by their cruel slavery.” Exodus 6:9. M.M. Thomas, “Liberation Motif in the Bible”, address given at the Jubilee celebrations of Gurukul Theological Seminary, 1978. Manuscript, UTC Archives.

¹²⁵ M. Azariah, “A Theology of Poverty and Mission”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 88

¹²⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Blessedness of a People”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, Delhi: ISPK & Kerala: Christava Sahitya Samithi, 1994, p. 51

as members of one family...The pursuit of human happiness is an all-round pursuit – material, moral and spiritual.¹²⁷

Bishop Azariah, clearly resonating with Thomas's position, affirms that Psalm 144 demonstrates God's concern for economic prosperity, physical health and plentiful material sustenance. It is a message relevant for all humanity as it seeks to build human community devoid of cries from the poor on the streets:

In the Psalm's passage we see the vision for the youth, both women and men to attain physical health and growth and food for all people to be available in plenty, and cattle wealth also to grow without miscarriage or abort there is also a prayer to avoid and prevent any food riots or starvation protest marches of hunger strikes or cry for basic rights by the poor heard anywhere on the streets in the community. In fact this is called a new song. Thus already we have a strong desire and vision for a new economic order of things to come, indeed a New Creation.¹²⁸

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that M.M. Thomas's vision in faith for the development of human community in Christ sought to include all people. It was a vision which sought fullness of life for each individual living in responsible relationship to others, and a vision of human community concerned for the spiritual and physical well being of others. This vision was essentially rooted theologically in his understanding of Creation and Redemption in Christ, and founded upon the vision of new humanity inaugurated in Christ.

5.3.1. Gospel for the Poor

The Mission of God, argues Bishop Azariah, was quite clear to Jesus; it was "undoubtedly to bring the Good News to the poor."¹²⁹ This was affirmed in various ways; through the angelic announcement to the poorest of the poor in Bethlehem that, 'Your Saviour is Born today' (Luke 2:1-16); through Mary, mother of Jesus, declaring that God had "lifted the lowly and filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands" (Luke 1: 46-56); through Jesus' parable of the

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ M. Azariah, "Christian Action for a New Economic Order", *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, pp. 53-54

¹²⁹ M. Azariah, "A Theology of Poverty and Mission", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 89

rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16: 19-31);¹³⁰ through Jesus himself declaring, “the spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 14:16-21).¹³¹ Azariah asks, ‘What could be the future of the Church that seeks to be the Father’s House?’ responding, ‘Can the Church be anything other than what the Lord of the Church has himself chosen to be?’¹³² The Creator of the heavens and the earth became a slave, Azariah adds, in order to meet the slaves, servants and bonded labourers, ‘sitting where they sat’ (Ezekiel 3:15), and freeing them from fear:

This God of boundless compassion became human not merely to opt for the poor, not just to take sides with the poor. But He became so thoroughly poor as to get into their skin, indeed into their whole being so much so He could truly say about his relationship with them saying, ‘I was hungry, I was in prison...I was naked...I was sick...and what you have done for the least of my brethren you have done it unto me’ (Matt. 25: 36-45)¹³³

In chapter II M.M. Thomas’s reflections upon Christ’s identity and solidarity with the oppressed was noted. This was, for Thomas, a key component of the Christian message, and he urged the Church to participate in the struggle for social transformation and socio-economic liberation of the people. Amidst a context of dynamic revolutionary ferment, which produced countless movements motivated by a vision of economic liberation, Thomas urged the Church to become actively involved in the struggle. This was not merely because he valued the goal of such movements, but also because he saw in such movements the inherent possibility for new forms of self-seeking individualism, corruption and exploitation as a result of sin.¹³⁴ Asking if the Church in India can truly become the Church of the awakened poor for social justice, he writes:

Without it...the poor would continue to seek the spiritual framework of their struggle for human dignity and social justice outside the stream of Christian faith. This is dangerous both for the Church and the social revolution. For the Church because it alienates itself from the essence of its own gospel to the poor; for

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 91-92

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 91

¹³⁴ M.M. Thomas, “The Church as the Servant of Society”, *The Church and Society*, Madras: CLS, 1962, p. 3

social revolution because in succumbing to the spirits alienated from Christ it moves into the realm of legalism and self-righteousness and betrays its own ends of justice.¹³⁵

Here Thomas makes clear the Christian contribution to the quest for a new society based on human dignity and social justice. In its 'essence' the Gospel message is a message to the poor, and therefore a Christian Church which fails to participate in the struggle for social justice alienates itself from the Gospel. Without the truth of the Gospel, those involved in the struggle for liberation will end up betraying their own ends of justice as a result of human sin, no matter how admirable and just the original vision. Thomas argues that the Church must be in solidarity with the poor and actively involved in the service of society. It must not shy away from responsible action, but come alongside all movements which seek the goal of human liberation, justice and dignity.

M.M. Thomas's position finds resonance in the theology of Azariah, although Azariah goes beyond Thomas at this point. For Azariah, Jesus' identification with the poor highlights the mission of God and thus the mission of the Church in favour of the poor. While Thomas does not downplay the significance of Jesus' solidarity with the poor, his concern is primarily in the judgement and forgiveness of the Cross in order that liberation movements do not betray their own ends of justice. While Azariah stresses God's 'direct option for the poor', a theological position which has significant implications for his understanding of Dalits as 'sinned-against', Thomas's theology provides a significant caution against Dalit theology becoming self-righteous, thus betraying its own ends of justice within the liberation struggle. We will return to this key distinction in subsequent chapters. At this point, however, it is important to recognise that both theologians acknowledge Christ's solidarity with the poor as an essential and inherent part of the Gospel message, and thus directly relevant to the mission of the Church in the world. M.M. Thomas calls upon the Church to be directly concerned for the poor in a bid to achieve social justice for all, for this is the very essence of the Gospel message. His is a vision not merely for the maintenance of the status quo, but

¹³⁵ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, pp. 42-43

for a transformed society in which the Church of Christ has a significant role to play in the struggle for justice and socio-economic liberation of the poor and oppressed in Indian society.

5.3.2. Social analysis and responsible action

A major theological shift taking place in post-Independence India, in which M.M. Thomas played a significant role, was the emergence of the Ecumenical Movement in India.¹³⁶ During this time the 'Cosmic Lordship of Christ' became a crucial theological credo for Indian Christian social thought, providing the framework within which theological questions could be applied to the dynamically changing social context and political history of India.¹³⁷ Thus the changing context of India began to influence and shape theological discourse in a stimulating way, challenging the Church in India to become responsible agents for social transformation.¹³⁸

Indian Christian social thinkers in the post-Independence years began to emphasise social action rather than social service, a shift which demanded greater attention to social analysis.¹³⁹ At the Triennial Conference of the S.C.M. in Hyderabad, 1950, attended by Thomas, the notion of forming a centre for the study of social questions was discussed, leading to the creation of The Christian Institute for the Study of Society (CISS) in 1951, later becoming the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), 1957.¹⁴⁰ In 1955 the World Council of Churches sponsored a worldwide study entitled 'Our Common Christian Response Towards Areas of Rapid Social Change'. M.M. Thomas became Executive Secretary of the Indian programme through the Ecumenical Study Commission of the National Council of Churches.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ Godwin Shiri, *Christian Social Thought in India, 1962-1977*, Madras: CLS, 1982, pp. 23-24

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24

¹³⁸ Shiri's book highlights shifts taking place in the Indian context which influenced theological discourse. Events such as the Sino-Indian conflict (1962), the Economic crisis (1967) and the Emergency (1975-1977) all shaped the questions being asked by Indian social thinkers.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9

Despite the increase of Christian social analysis and the increased work of Christian social action groups in pre and post-Independent India, however, there remained a significant divide between the work of action groups and the churches. Indeed the social and political activities of groups such as the YMCA came to be regarded as departments separate from the churches.¹⁴² Dismayed, Thomas urged a reduction in this gap in order that such activity could become an integral part of Church life and mission.¹⁴³ He was critical of ‘non-political’ Christianity which he considered deeply rooted in Indian Christian spirituality,¹⁴⁴ with churches becoming content to be involved in works of individual salvation and charitable service without a strong emphasis on the transformation of society.¹⁴⁵ Thomas writes that the churches in India, in order to be relevant to the discourse relating to national life, must “fight a battle against an other-worldly, individualistic and ‘purely spiritual’ understanding of Christ and his Gospel which is widely prevalent.”¹⁴⁶ Without a theological renewal concerning the social character of redemption in Jesus Christ, Thomas believed the awakening of the Church to its essential social responsibility would be impossible.¹⁴⁷ To be true to Christ, who came to renew the individual and society, he urged that the Church move beyond its narrow concern of spiritual salvation and seek to engage with those beyond its walls in a bid to transform society.¹⁴⁸ Failure to do so would equate, in Kraemerian terms, to a conversion to God without a corresponding conversion to the world.¹⁴⁹

It is argued that the emergence of Dalit Theology, while a movement seeking to establish a unique theological voice representative of Dalits, finds key points of continuity from the groundwork laid by the Indian social thinkers during this time.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 20

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 132

¹⁴⁴ Certainly this observation on pietistic thought extends far beyond the context of India.

¹⁴⁵ M.M. Thomas, “The Mission of the Church and Human Community”, Bishop Sadiq Memorial Lectures, February-March, 1983, Calcutta. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁴⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Indian Nationalism: A Christian Interpretation”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1959, p. 5; Godwin Shiri, *op. cit.*, p. 23

¹⁴⁷ P.D. Devanandan & M.M. Thomas, ed. *Christian Participation in Nation Building*, Bangalore: NCCI & CISRS, 1960, p. 290; Godwin Shiri, *op. cit.*, p. 23

¹⁴⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Open Church”, *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, p. 424

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*; M.M. Thomas, “A Spirituality for Combat”, Sermon preached at Princeton Seminary, December 8, 1983. Manuscript, UTC Archives.

The endeavour of ecumenical theologians such as Thomas to seek a valid theological paradigm in support of positive social action and transformation is undoubtedly relevant to the future quest of Dalit theologians. In this respect we find significant reference to M.M. Thomas in the writings of Bishop Azariah. Indeed, Azariah writes:

It is this same malaise in the Indian Church that has been identified and bemoaned by M.M. Thomas...Giving the Bishop Sadiq memorial lectures in 1983, Dr Thomas...had then said, 'Unfortunately the idea of non-political Christianity is too deeply rooted in the Indian Christian spirituality so that the Indian Churches are happy only in the works of individual salvation and charitable service. They are afraid of participating in organizing the oppressed Dalits of this land or leading them in organized struggles against oppressive caste-class power structures existing in this land to secure social justice'.¹⁵⁰

Bishop Azariah acknowledges the need for social analysis in order to assist local churches in becoming more familiar with the social condition of the local people.¹⁵¹ He affirms the work of CISRS, describing it as a 'pioneer in societal studies', and acknowledges the tremendous influence of Thomas's co-authored book, *Christian Participation in Nation Building*.¹⁵² While affirming the importance of the CISRS, however, Azariah emphasized the "lacuna in understanding the Indian society" resulting from its failure to give adequate attention to the issue of caste.¹⁵³ Indeed it was this very lacuna which first generation Dalit theologians sought to redress. Accepting this critique, however, should not detract from acknowledging the significant contribution of M.M. Thomas towards Indian Christian social thought. By raising challenging questions regarding the role of Christianity and the Church in the secular-social and political realm of India, issues such as justice, equality, responsibility and praxis became central to theological discourse. Indeed it is argued

¹⁵⁰ M. Azariah, "To Take Seriously Hitherto Neglected Possibilities", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, pp. 122-123. See, M.M. Thomas, "The Mission of the Church and Human Community", Bishop Sadiq Memorial Lectures, February-March, 1983, Calcutta. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁵¹ M. Azariah, "Peace and Human Rights", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 106

¹⁵² M. Azariah, "The Church and its Development Ministry", *Witnessing In India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, pp. 66-67

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 67

that Dalit theology emerged not only as a response to, but also a continuation of this discourse based upon context specific experience and analysis.

5.3.3. *Charity and Justice*

A major concern for Dalit Christian theology, argues Bishop Azariah, is their state of 'dependency':

The grinding poverty and illiteracy in which all outcastes are immersed in, raised the big question, how to redeem this great mass of people from their impossible plight? They own no land and have no job opportunities to earn their living. They are made to be a permanently dependent community on the doles and charities from the society and the Government. Thus no basic solution for the problems of out-castes in this land has ever been made. They are nowhere near becoming a self-reliant community. They are a 'no-people' and God knows how can these people be made organized into 'a people' with self-respect and self-awareness of their selfhood.¹⁵⁴

Dependency on the charity of others has significant implications for Dalit identity. Significantly for this research, M.M. Thomas challenged the concept of charity prevalent in the Indian Church. He observed that the Church was content to be involved in acts of charitable service, yet critical that such charity offered little challenge to existing structures of society.¹⁵⁵ Failure to challenge the *status quo* reinforced oppressive structures of Indian life, which Thomas perceived as a denial of the Church's mission to struggle for human rights wherever denied.¹⁵⁶ Indeed he considered the Church's mission as exercising "a prophetic ministry of speaking truth to power in the name of God's concern for justice to the poor and the oppressed."¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ M. Azariah, "The Indian Church and Dalit Liberation", *Christ and Dalit Liberation*, Madras: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1987, p. 12

¹⁵⁵ M.M. Thomas, "Theological Aspects of the Relationship Between Social Action Groups and Churches", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, June, 1984, p. 20

¹⁵⁶ M.M. Thomas, "The Mission of the Church and Human Community", Bishop Sadiq Memorial Lectures, Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Positively acknowledging that the Church participates in a tremendous amount of work, Thomas cautions against the limited political concern or effort to affect change:¹⁵⁸

I am sure that the charity model of identification with the poor of Mother Teresa is important for the Church's social witness any time. But what about the other model – like that of Archbishop Romero of Salvador, who gets murdered by State authorities because of his political identification with the poor? I have a fear that the leaders of both Indian Church and Indian State eulogise the Mother Teresa model precisely because they want to avoid even talking about the other model of politics for the social change. Here again we push things under the rug and do not bring them into discussion in relation to the theological wholeness of the Ministry of the Church in India.¹⁵⁹

Here Thomas once again acknowledges the solidarity of Christ with the oppressed, particularly through the experience of the Cross, and calls upon the Christian Church to identify itself with the victims, the poor and the oppressed.¹⁶⁰ There is also a demand for active participation on the part of the Church and of Christians in society, for “only participants earn the right to be prophets.”¹⁶¹ The call for the Church is not to be involved on behalf of the oppressed alone, but for the oppressed to themselves become subjects of their cause, participating in the power-structures to affect necessary change. Certainly one must be critical of such an attitude if used against a people, blaming them should systems of oppression fail to change. Yet it is clear that Thomas acknowledges people's subject status within the power structures of society as an essential step towards a just society. As noted above, Azariah is concerned that Dalits are a ‘no-people’, nowhere near becoming a self-reliant community. For Azariah, like Thomas, conscientisation, empowerment and self-reliance as participant subjects of history become key features of theological reflection.

¹⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, “Theological Aspects of the Relationship Between Social Action Groups and Churches”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, June, 1984, p. 20

¹⁵⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, p. 16

¹⁶⁰ M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, The Bishop Joshi Memorial Lectures, Bandra West Bombay: BUILD, 1984, p. 4

¹⁶¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Challenge of the Churches in the New Nations in Africa and Asia”, *Towards a Contemporary Ecumenism*, Madras: CLS, 1978, p. 80. Presentation made to the WCC, New Delhi, November 28, 1961.

5.4 Power

In his book, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, M.M. Thomas refers to the 1980 WCC Report entitled, 'Towards a Church in Solidarity with the Poor':

The struggle in the process of liberation must be accepted and understood as necessary...When the poor and the oppressed people stand up for liberation against the powerful who oppress them, that very act humanizes them and empowers them. The established ecclesiastical bodies have been conditioned historically to avoid conflict and to expect the Church not to disturb the calm of ongoing life. That conditioning must be overcome, where fundamental causes are at stake.¹⁶²

Affirming the truth of this statement Thomas adds, "We have made reconciliation and peace too cheap...Lord make us messengers of strife in a world of false peace and messenger of peace in a world of strife. Christianity as messengers of strife in our world of false peace needs emphasis in our time."¹⁶³ A false peace cannot be accepted if the sacrifice of such peace is the continued exploitation and oppression of the people. At the heart of Thomas's theology is a concern for the poor and oppressed, advocating empowerment as a liberating tool in the process of humanisation.

The chief goal of Dalit liberation, for Bishop Azariah, is emancipation from all forms of enslavement, oppression and deprivation. Ultimately the Dalit demand is for development aiming at:

[r]eleasing the broken, restoring the marginalised, and transforming the present exploitative and oppressive economic, political, social and cultural structures into a just society. In this vision of a just society, exploitation of man by man, and the domination of man over man, and man over woman is to be overcome. The Development becomes the process whereby the people, the poor and the oppressed being the primary bearers of humanization, liberate themselves from all forms of enslavement and create a condition in which there are no oppressed and no oppressor.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, p. 51

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ M. Azariah, "The Church and Its Development Ministry", *Witnessing In India Today*, p. 59

Given the indignities, inequalities and injustices of Dalit existence, Azariah notes that ‘power’ becomes an essential concern, central to all human relationships and thus relevant to the struggle for human dignity, equality and justice.¹⁶⁵ This power, he argues, relates to transformation at three levels; the power to transform exploitative structures; the power to transform exploitative human relationships; the power of Dalit self-identity, dignity and worth, in order to become ‘self-liberators’.¹⁶⁶ Azariah claims that empowerment from a condition of ‘utter powerlessness’ is a central issue for Dalit liberation, arguing that emancipation will come only when the Dalits themselves desire and struggle for it.¹⁶⁷

5.4.1. Wounded Psyche

Bishop Azariah refers to a survey conducted of 100 families near Egmore railway station, Madras. All those taking part in the study were unskilled, illiterate Dalits seeking a better life in the city, having known “only inhuman and humiliating treatment as ‘untouchables’”.¹⁶⁸ Azariah writes:

Had their life changed now in the city? Not really very much, they stated. Why so? All the hundred families insisted with one voice, it was their fate and Karma that they were born to this kind of life. They strongly believed it was their destiny – written on their heads since their previous existence and it could never be altered. There was no hope of changing what karma had predetermined for them... For their perpetual state of utter poverty and oppression these millions can only blame themselves and their fate.¹⁶⁹

Referring to the seminal work of A.G. Hogg, *Karma and Redemption*, Azariah notes how the theory of Karma had been used to justify inequalities among both individuals and communities, denying the “inherent equality in the divine created order.”¹⁷⁰ Azariah argues that Dalits have been made to feel like an inferior race of people through unequal treatment and daily humiliations passed down from

¹⁶⁵ M. Azariah, “Peace and Human Rights”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 100

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ M. Azariah, “Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 166

¹⁶⁸ M. Azariah, *Mission in Christ’s Way in India Today*, Madras: CLS , 1989, p. 11

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ M. Azariah, “Introduction”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. xvi

generation to generation. Dalits, he suggests, have been “captured and enslaved in their minds by Brahminic logic”,¹⁷¹ adding: “The profound damage the belief in Karma has done to the outcaste Dalits may be recognised in their servile acceptance of lowly status and utter sense of apathy, fatalism and resignation to their present lot in life...Because of this mentality fixation most Dalits seem to enjoy slavery doing nothing about it themselves.”¹⁷²

The term ‘wounded psyche’ was coined by Bishop Azariah to describe the internalised condition of Dalit oppression. This is a deep wound inflicted on both individuals and collective personalities over countless generations as a result of physical, emotional and intellectual humiliations.¹⁷³ It is an internalised wound caused by acceptance of inequality as a result of Karma, becoming ‘deadly to the whole of [Dalit] personality’.¹⁷⁴ It is, he argues, a disease suffered by all Dalits, both educated and totally illiterate.¹⁷⁵ This deep wound is healed through a process of conscientisation, which overcomes the sense of unworthiness and inferiority leading to a new state of individual self-worth and dignity. This in turn becomes the source of human empowerment essential to the struggle for liberating social action and transformation. Conscientisation thus becomes necessary for the oppressed in struggling to liberate themselves from their ‘indignities, inequalities and injustices’.¹⁷⁶ Service as a witness to Christ goes beyond mere charitable, ambulance service, notes Azariah. Rather, it is concerned with dynamic action on the part of believers “to liberate the poor and release all those who are oppressed in bondage and slavery.”¹⁷⁷

5.4.2. M.M. Thomas’s reflections on Power

M.M. Thomas was deeply conscious of the significance of power in the realm of theological reflection and responsible action. He writes: “India’s is a power

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. xviii

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. xvi

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. xix

¹⁷⁴ M. Azariah, “Indian Situation Today and the Role of the Church in Justice Concerns”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, pp. 116-117

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ M. Azariah, “Peace and Human Rights”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 102

¹⁷⁷ M. Azariah, “Five bible Studies on Christian Witness”, *Witnessing in India Today*, p. 32

structure which oppresses economically and culturally and socially at once the propertyless labouring class in rural and urban societies, the outcastes, the tribals and the women.”¹⁷⁸ For effective transformation of Indian society to take place, Thomas urged that the concept of power be given serious attention by Indian Christian theologians. Indeed he observes two significant levels at which power is related to justice; at an ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ level.

The objective dimension is concerned with “changing the institutions of society in which monopoly of economic, political or cultural power in the hands of the few makes possible exploitation and oppression of the many.”¹⁷⁹ In this sense the goal of justice is to change the structures to enable a more egalitarian distribution of power which enables the people to participate in the centres of society where power is held and decision are made.¹⁸⁰ He was conscious that the power structure of traditional India excluded and exploited large numbers of people, acknowledging that Dalits had been denied their rights by elite power holders seeking to maintain the benefits of privilege.¹⁸¹ While objective power is essential in the process of transformation, Thomas urged that the people be empowered to participate in the structures of objective justice in order to “have the fullest share in the resources of the earth, of technology, and culture, so that they can live and develop as human beings.”¹⁸² Participation in the political realm is thus considered an essential part of societal change.

Beyond the essential concern for objective justice, then, Thomas also stressed the need for ‘subjective’ justice, relating to:

[t]he development of the consciousness of the oppressed people so that they themselves see the reality of their situation and take responsibility for changing it and creating new structures and institutions. Thus the victims of oppression themselves become subjects of their own history, and do not remain objects of charity,

¹⁷⁸ M.M. Thomas, “Spiritual Penetration: Revolts of the Poor and the Oppressed”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXVII, No. 1, 1980, p. 18

¹⁷⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, p. 31

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel and the Quest of Modern Asia”, *Union Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3, March, 1967, p. 230

¹⁸² M.M. Thomas, “The Struggle for Human Rights”, *Third World Scholars Consortium*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1985, p. 7

development, welfare or manipulation as objects of revolution from outside.¹⁸³

Here we find significant resonance with Azariah, who urges Dalits to claim their human identity, affirming themselves as subjects of their own history in order to struggle for liberation and social transformation.¹⁸⁴ M.M. Thomas saw in the modern revolutions of Asia an awakening of the oppressed people to the reality of violations committed against their fundamental human rights and their human dignity.¹⁸⁵ Here Thomas recognises the power of human identity as essential to the struggle for liberation against oppressed human rights and human dignity.

On the subject of power, Thomas was influenced by Martin Luther King Junior. King described power as the ability to achieve purpose and the strength to bring about political, economic and social change.¹⁸⁶ While 'love' and 'power' had been considered polar opposites, King argued that there was nothing wrong with power in itself, but rather with power distribution. Justice demanded a more equal distribution of power and the participation of the people in the centres of power, a demand which required an awakening of African American consciousness in order to struggle against progressive and unjust forces. King writes: "No Lincolnian emancipation proclamation of Kennedyan or Johnsonian civil rights bill can totally bring about...freedom. The Negro will only be truly free when he reaches down to the inner depths of his own being and signs with the pen and ink of asserting his own emancipation proclamation."¹⁸⁷

Affirming King's position, Thomas acknowledges the inter-related nature of both subjective and objective dimensions of justice. It is essential, he argues, that people reject the image of themselves perpetuated and reinforced by their oppressors. The oppressed must not regard themselves as victims of fate, but rather as victims of injustice, thus empowering them to claim a new 'sense of selfhood'

¹⁸³ M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, p. 31

¹⁸⁴ M. Azariah, "Christ and Dalit Liberation", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 147

¹⁸⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Gospel and the Quest of Modern Asia", *Union Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3, March, 1967, p. 231

¹⁸⁶ M.M. Thomas, "Basic Approaches to Power – Gandhi, Andrews and King", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, 1969, p. 21

¹⁸⁷ Martin Luther King Jr. quoted in, M.M. Thomas, *Ibid.*, p. 24

which would allow them to be bearers of their own future.¹⁸⁸ Thomas affirms the stance of the Nairobi assembly of the WCC, 1975, which stated that the struggle against oppression and injustice must inevitably become a confrontation with power.¹⁸⁹ This, adds Thomas, has biblical precedent, emphasising the fact that a ‘no-people’ were made a ‘people’, called to co-operate with God in making history. Relevant for today, he continues, this message calls for the poor and oppressed to become active agents in the development process.¹⁹⁰

M.M. Thomas’s concern to bring the issue of power into the heart of theological discourse in India is considered significant to the Dalit quest for empowerment and participation in the struggle for identity and justice. Azariah’s emphasis on emancipation from the ‘wounded psyche’ in order to become active agents of liberation finds clear resonance with Thomas. Indeed, both theologians affirm the need for conscientisation of the people as a step towards humanisation, essential in the participatory struggle as subjects of history towards individual and social liberation. It is thus argued that M.M. Thomas offered significant signposts relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology.

6. Conclusion

Adopting a methodologically exclusive posture, Azariah rejects the contribution of M.M. Thomas on the grounds that he was a caste Syrian Christian bound within a ‘Brahminic’ theological mindset, thus irrelevant for Dalit Christians. Based upon this assumption, Azariah further argued that M.M. Thomas excluded Dalits from his theological reflections on humanisation. In this chapter I have argued that Azariah’s criticism fails to acknowledge Thomas’s own criticism of the Syrian Christian tradition and his own Mar Thoma tradition. Indeed Thomas’s theology was nurtured in a dynamic theological environment which challenged Christians to become active in the struggle for social transformation and justice. He rejected the prevalence of caste within the Church, the formation of churches based on

¹⁸⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, p. 32

¹⁸⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 49

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

communal caste identity, and opposed a lop-sided theological emphasis on personal piety at the cost of social transformation and social relationships within society. It has been demonstrated that Thomas essentially included Dalits within his theological conception of humanisation, and was deeply concerned for the pursuit of justice, dignity and empowerment of the oppressed in the process of transformation. Indeed, Thomas urged the Church to participate in the struggle for social justice, arguing that a Christian Church which fails to do so alienates itself from the essence of the Gospel message to the poor and the oppressed.

Moving beyond his own restrictive methodological framework, Bishop Azariah significantly affirms the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas. While critical that Thomas's theology was not constructed with specific reference to the caste system, Azariah recognizes Thomas's theological striving to bring humanisation into the fore of theological enquiry, encouraging the Church and the people to become active participants in the struggle for transformation. Thomas's theological emphasis on both objective and subjective forms of justice finds clear resonance in Bishop Azariah's theology. The recognition of power, both in terms of human identity and empowerment to participate as subjects of history in objective power structures, is a key theological issue prevalent in both theologians.

M.M. Thomas's theology reveals a strong Christological stance against forces of exploitation, indignity, and injustice. Significantly these factors are featured at the heart of Bishop Azariah's theology. Thomas was a liberation theologian who stood opposed to caste communalism, class injustice, human indignity and powerlessness, and a theologian searching for a dynamic theological foundation adequate to the quest for a full, liberating and just Indian society. It is here that the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas to the emergence of Dalit theology becomes most apparent.

Chapter IV: Critical Dialogue: M.M. Thomas and Bishop V. Devasahayam

1. Introduction

In his death we have lost a valuable co-pilgrim and guide in our theological journey. The goal of M.M.'s life and thought could be summarized as *Humanization*, humanizing the dehumanized or peopling the de-peopled. It has been a search for the last, the least and the lost...I have drawn many valuable insights of M.M. for my lectures. As a student of M.M., I was greatly influenced by him in my theologizing and am making these presentations as a humble token of my gratitude to Dr. M.M. Thomas.¹

These tributary words spoken by V. Devasahayam reflect a great respect for the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas. Beyond essential contextual and epistemological differences, there are significant points of resonance between the two theologians. 'Humanising the dehumanised', 'peopling the de-peopled', 'concern for the last, least and lost', are common phrases found at the heart of Dalit Christian theological discourse. Indeed, Devasahayam acknowledges that he was 'greatly influenced' by Thomas in his own theologising. In this chapter I shall attempt to identify key theological points of influence which support the thesis that M.M. Thomas offered significant theological fragments for the emergence of Dalit theology.

In this chapter I begin with a critical explication of Bishop Devasahayam's polarising methodology, arguing that such a methodology is inadequate for locating M.M. Thomas's theology. Moving beyond this dichotomy allows us to recognise key theological fragments in Thomas's thought relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology. In particular I shall be concerned with Thomas's reflections on humanisation and justice. While these two areas are analysed separately for

¹ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, Bangalore: BTE-SSC, 1998, p. 110 This article is the result of three lectures delivered by Devasahayam at the 87th Mar Thoma Student's Conference in Tiruvalla, Kerala, December, 1996

methodological purposes, they are understood to be integrally related. Concerning the concept of humanisation, it is argued that M.M. Thomas theologically; 1) emphasised the integral relation between theology and anthropology, interpreting human spirituality and salvation as essentially related to the material and social realm; 2) understood the human person as a transcendent spiritual being within the realm of nature, created free from conformity to religious, cultural or social dogma; 3) emphasised human dignity as an essential component of humanness.

Concerning the concept of justice, it will be argued that Thomas; 1) understood justice to be integrally related to the theological concept of divine-human and human-human relationship; 2) sought to relate individual and corporate morality and responsibility, emphasising concern for social transformation and justice; 3) interpreted the theological paradigm of New Humanity in Christ as directly concerned with liberating justice for the oppressed as a creative human vocation; 4) optimistically affirmed the hope for liberating social transformation through the power of the Cross and Resurrection of Christ; 5) recognised the need for contextual discernment and biblical hermeneutics in the ongoing quest for justice; 6) sought to bring theological reflection on justice into the heart of public secular discourse in a bid to provide a spiritual foundation for a transformed Indian society.

Interacting with the theology of Bishop Devasahayam through the course of the chapter, it is argued that Thomas offered significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology.

2. The Methodology of V. Devasahayam

2.1. Caste – The Original Sin

Given the reality of significant shifts taking place in the context of post-Independent India, as noted in Chapter I, discourse relating to caste has changed, in the public arena at least. Hugo Gorringe, in his study of Dalit Movements in Tamil Nadu, writes of the Dalit situation:

To suggest that nothing has changed since Independence would be ridiculous...The constitution *has* undermined the legitimacy of caste and provided the oppressed with the institutional means to challenge their subordinate status. The capitalisation and

liberalisation of the economy, in conjunction with the reservations system, has combined to reduce the association between occupations and caste status. Payment in cash means that contractual exchanges are divorced from connotations of purity and impurity and political legislation has guaranteed the SC's parliamentary representation.²

Despite these significant shifts, first generation Dalit theologians sought to re-emphasise caste as the determining feature of Indian reality. Change in contemporary discourse had done little to alleviate the plight of Dalits, for caste based attitudes of inequality remained fixed. In a graded system, notes M.S. Srinivas, the principle of social mobility operates on the following lines: "I am equal to those who think of themselves as my betters, and I am better than those who regard themselves as my equals and how dare my inferiors claim equality with me."³ Devasahayam stresses the need to identify caste as the primary evil in the historical and contemporary Indian context, and thus as the *paradigmatic principle* for Dalit theological protest:

Dalit theology recognises caste as the unique feature of Indian social order, caste is all pervasive...caste provides primary or controlling identity for nearly all Indians and is the source of great divide in our society, in comparison to that, every other division pales into insignificance. Dalit theology adopts caste as the principle that governs the process of enquiry/analysis of society and the concept of God.⁴

The concept of 'outcaste' cannot be detached from the concept of 'caste', for the outcaste is defined in reference to the caste system. As caste identity is the 'controlling identity', religious, systemic, or economic shifts have little impact in overcoming oppressive attitudes towards the Dalits. Indeed, Devasahayam observes, caste unites the rich and the poor. The poor will never unite in India for caste divides

² While Gorringer grants these changes are significant, his study suggests that the greatest impact to the reconfiguration of community life comes through localised Dalit movements which challenge traditional power dynamics. Hugo Gorringer, *Untouchable Citizens: Dalit Movements and Democratisation in Tamil Nadu*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2005, p. 21

³ Quote from M.S. Srinivas, in V. Devasahayam, "Dimensions of Dalit Dilemma", Andreas Nehring, ed. *Prejudice: Issues in Third World Theologies*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1996, p. 289

⁴ V. Devasahayam, "Turn to God, rejoice in Hope: A Dalit Perspective", *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, November, 1998, p. 9

them. Similarly, Devasahayam argues, caste unites members of different religions. An upper caste Christian will marry a Hindu from the same caste, but will not marry a Christian from a different caste. Stressing his point further, Devasahayam notes that during the Hindu-Muslim riots following the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodha, 1992, one Muslim man freely roamed the streets without fear of attack. Encouraged by fellow Muslims to remain in hiding, the man informed them that he was safe for he was a convert from the same caste community as the rioting Hindus. Based upon such realities, Devasahayam asks whether religion or caste is the primary Indian identity.⁵

Devasahayam describes caste as a “social evil...built on the premise of inequality, segregation and denial of human life.”⁶ It is a system which treats Dalits as untouchables, polluted and contaminated, and has greater respect for animal life than Dalit life.⁷ It is a system which is “primarily responsible for the oppression and dehumanisation of the many.”⁸ Caste is considered the “mother of all evils of Indian society”.⁹ He explains:

Indian society is arranged according to caste. Caste system, a unique Indian phenomenon is a religious system sanctioned and sustained by Hinduism. For sociologist Louis Dumont, caste system is inconceivable apart from the Hindu context. Everything in Hinduism, philosophy, myths, art and culture convey the single message. Accept caste at any cost.¹⁰

Reference to Dumont is particularly significant in firmly establishing the integral relation of Hinduism and caste as the primary feature of Indian context.

Devasahayam regards caste system and Hinduism to be essentially related, observing that the end of caste will mean the end of Hinduism.¹¹

⁵ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam, CSI Diocesan Office, Chennai, 21st November, 2005

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ V. Devasahayam, “Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1997, p. 271

⁹ V. Devasahayam, “Recovering the Biblical Vision”, *Outside the Camp*, Chennai: Gurukul Theological College and Research Centre, 1998, p. 3

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam.

It is in this context that the Christian Gospel must be proclaimed in order to break the shackles of Hinduism and its caste system: “If [the Gospel’s] very salvific work is not related to this particular form of bondage and oppression in India then that salvation is irrelevant to the Indian context – it is not contextually relevant salvation.”¹² Like the rich ruler who does not want to give up his wealth, Devasahayam argues, Indians do not want to give up their caste. Anyone wanting to enjoy the privilege of caste status while attempting to champion the cause of the Dalits, he adds, is merely trying to serve two masters, God and Mammon.¹³ If the Indian caste theologian is unprepared to renounce his/her caste status, then there can be no true proclamation of Christ, for the Cross becomes a symbol of shame.¹⁴

Significantly, Devasahayam’s criticism of Indian Christian theologians for failing to relate theology specifically to caste includes M.M. Thomas. Devasahayam asked me rhetorically if M.M. Thomas had ever developed a theology of caste.¹⁵ In bold terms Devasahayam condemns traditional Indian theologies as ‘demonologies’:

[w]e describe salvation of Jesus Christ as Christ’s victory over demons – the traditional theology. Yet for us in India the demon has not been identified. Caste, which is the demon has not been identified, named, and attacked with vengeance. All that were written earlier were not theologies but demonologies which make the very demon safe and happy in the context of theologies.¹⁶

Elsewhere Devasahayam writes:

Caste system is...a particularly delightful idolatry of most caste Christians; all idolatry is enslaving and destructive. A theology that does not identify, expose and attempt to dismantle a demonic system, has lost its credibility as theology because it contributes not to liberation but to enslavement. They can be properly called as demonology and not theology.¹⁷

Ecumenical caste Christians in the twentieth century, Devasahayam observes, scandalously failed to perceive caste in the church as sinful, concerned

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ V. Devasahayam, “Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 277

instead with emphasising the sinful nature of denominationalism.¹⁸ This he considered a “diversionary tactic of the upper caste Christian in the name of theology and ecumenism.”¹⁹ Identifying denominationalism as a sin while neglecting the question of caste ensured that a ‘cheap Gospel’ had been preached in India. Caste Christians content to give up denominational identity in the name of ecumenism were *unwilling* to give up their caste identity.²⁰ Devasahayam adds: “Why is it that we preach the cheap Gospel and not the radical Gospel that touches at the core of the Indian identity? Christ has not come to save us from superficial sins. Christ has come to save us from Original sin, which is caste system in India.”²¹ There has never been, he adds, a “relevant Christology in this country.”²²

Bishop Devasahayam clearly reflects the revolutionary passion of first generation Dalit Christian thinkers amidst the nascent movement of Dalit theology. The caste versus Dalit dichotomy is clear, evident from the use of the term ‘demonology’ to describe previous Indian theologies. Certainly M.M. Thomas did not write a theology specifically related to caste. Yet to describe Thomas’s theology as a demonology fails to adequately reflect Thomas’s essential rejection of the caste system within his theology, as observed in the previous chapter. Thus while Devasahayam’s criticism against Indian theologians for neglecting caste as a ‘specific’ theological concern is well taken, it is argued that he goes too far in dismissing Indian theologians as demonologists.

M.M. Thomas is categorised by Devasahayam within the Indian theological tradition, thus implying that Thomas’s theology is little more than a demonology and his Christology irrelevant for the Indian context. Yet how are we to relate these comments in view of Devasahayam’s reference to Thomas as a ‘co-pilgrim’ and ‘guide’ in the theological journey of India on behalf of the last, the least and the lost? Indeed it is within this tension that this thesis is situated. In the following section I shall examine Devasahayam’s methodological categorisation of Indian

¹⁸ For a study of Christianity’s attitude to caste see Duncan Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, London: Curzon Press Ltd, 1979

¹⁹ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.* Here Devasahayam refers specifically to the Church of South India. Although Thomas was not a member of this Church, his position as an ecumenical theologian is undoubted.

²² *Ibid.*

theology as a ‘tale of two theologies’, and argue that such a position is inadequate for locating the theology of M.M. Thomas. This, I suggest, opens the path for locating M.M. Thomas as a theologian who offered significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology.

2.2. A Tale of Two Theologies

As a first generation Dalit theologian, Devasahayam interprets Dalit theology as a counter-theology in line with Arvind P. Nirmal, thus polarising Dalit theology as against Indian Christian theology. Indeed Devasahayam terms the Indian theological tradition as a ‘tale of two Indian theologies’:²³

At the initial stages of attempting to construct Indian theology, two strands vis à vis caste are clearly discernable. One maintained that the caste system is Indian social order and hence part of Indian culture. It adopted an unethical attitude to caste and tried to relate the gospel with the dominant Brahminic tradition. In so far as this approach failed to critique and judge caste in the light of the gospel, this approach values status quo with regard to caste and could be called *caste theology*. The other approach held the caste system as a Hindu religious institution, whose values are totally inconsistent with the Christian gospel. It challenged the churches towards a total break with caste systems. This approach is identified as the *Dalit approach* in theologising.²⁴

Theologians adopting the ‘caste approach’, he argues, used Brahminical religious philosophical tools to interpret the Christian gospel within the cultural context of India,²⁵ thus demonstrating a “narrow perception of Indian context in terms of religio-philosophical components to the utter neglect of the socio-economic political realities.”²⁶ This caste approach perceived religion in primarily individualistic, spiritual, or other worldly terms,²⁷ and the Bible was used to reinforce an individualistic and devotional attitude to the spiritual realm of the human being. It

²³ V. Devasahayam, “Conflicting Roles of the Bible and Culture in Shaping Indian Theology: A Tale of Two Indian Theologies”, www.ocms.ac.uk/transformation/articles/1503.021_dev.pdf, p. 21

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23. Emphasis added.

²⁵ V. Devasahayam, “Conflicting Roles of the Bible and Culture in Shaping Indian Theology: A Tale of Two Indian Theologies”, p. 23

²⁶ V. Devasahayam, “Doing Dalit Theology”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 271

²⁷ V. Devasahayam, “Conflicting Roles of the Bible and Culture in Shaping Indian Theology: A Tale of Two Indian Theologies”, p. 24

sought points of continuity within the Christian Bible and the Hindu Scriptures, resulting in the construction of Christian theology within the philosophical framework of *vedānta*,²⁸ providing Biblical and theological justification for the endorsement of caste domination.²⁹ Devasahayam writes: “We are particularly angry with those theologians who want to relate the Gospel to the Brahminic culture, the culture of the oppressors and an oppressive culture and force it on the Indian church which is predominantly a Dalit church.”³⁰

In contrast to ‘caste theologians’, Devasahayam continues, the Dalit approach recognizes the significance of both vertical and ‘horizontal’ dimensions of new life in Christ, experienced as the “emancipation of individual and social identity with a new liberated individual and social consciousness.”³¹ Religion relates holistically to the corporate social reality, essentially incorporating spiritual, social and prophetic dimensions. Thus salvation is related not merely to life after death but is concerned primarily with life after birth. Issues such as land protection, education, and protection from injustice thus demand theological attention. The salvation offered by Christ “aims at the social transformation and infusion in society of the values of the reign of God such as freedom, equality, fraternity, peace and justice.”³²

Dalit evangelism and mission seek to bring forth men and women who are ‘born against’ sinful structures, motivating people in the struggle “for a fuller and richer human life.”³³ Dalit Christian thinkers experience caste as an oppressive cultural reality, rejecting it as inconsistent with the Christian gospel. The Bible, Devasahayam argues, becomes an instrument of ‘liberation’ for Dalits in the following ways: as a resource for motivating Christians to “become collaborators with Christ in his struggle against the enslaving principalities and powers” within the structures of Indian society; as a critical and creative resource relevant to the people in the contemporary struggle for liberation; as a source discontinuous with the

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ V. Devasahayam, “Doing Dalit Theology”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 281

³¹ V. Devasahayam, “Conflicting Roles of the Bible and Culture in Shaping Indian Theology: A Tale of Two Indian Theologies”, p. 24

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Brahminical tradition and continuous with Dalit history and culture; as a source demonstrating God's concern for the oppressed; as a rejection of social and racial distinctions as part of the divinely created order resulting from human sinfulness.³⁴ In this reading of the Bible, Christ overcomes all barriers and the gospel recognises no distinction such as caste.³⁵ Devasahayam writes:

New life in Christ is the basis of Christian social action, constantly inspired and encouraged by the apocalyptic vision of God's final victory over all enemies. The Bible was clearly seen and experienced as a stimulating agent for the historical struggles aimed at the establishment of God's reign...The gospel-culture encounter should lead us to a new perception of the world, a new set of values and new life style with a commitment for the liberation of the last and the least, which may be very different from those of the caste ideology.³⁶

While the 'elitist' theological perspective justifies the *status quo*, condoning exploitation and oppression of the people, the Dalit perspective challenges oppressive structures and strives for transformation in a bid for justice and equality.³⁷ The dichotomous 'tale of two theologies' provides a methodological framework for Devasahayam to seek a relevant Dalit paradigmatic strategy for liberation and transformation. The Dalit perspective is, accordingly, a rejection of the elitist caste perspective, for the two perspectives stand diametrically opposed to one another.³⁸

If we are to adopt Devasahayam's methodology for locating M.M. Thomas, it seems somewhat disingenuous to label him a 'caste theologian'. As noted in the previous chapter Thomas did not seek to interpret the Christian gospel through the lens of Brahminical religious philosophy, did not perceive religion primarily in individualistic or spiritual terms, and did not seek to interpret the Bible to justify or endorse caste or communal domination. Indeed it could be argued that M.M. Thomas's theology finds greater proximity with the Dalit approach, as each of

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27

³⁷ V. Devasahayam, "Doing Women's Theology", V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 31

³⁸ V. Devasahayam, "Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions", V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 275

Devasahayam's defining characteristics noted above finds theological resonance in Thomas. I shall resist taking this approach, however, for I consider the critical contention to be the dichotomy itself, which requires theologians to be rigidly categorised into the 'caste' or 'Dalit' camp. This framework is insufficient for adequately locating the theology of M.M. Thomas. This is not to downplay essential differences in the two approaches. Yet moving beyond this methodology provides scope to acknowledge Thomas as a theologian who contributed significant theological signposts for emerging Dalit theology. This avoids placing Thomas too firmly within the Indian Christian theological tradition as interpreted by Dalit theologians, and also avoids placing him untenably within the Dalit theological tradition.

The initial call for Dalit theology to emerge as a counter theology is of course to be understood in the historical context of the denial of Dalit theological space, and as an endeavour to re-contextualise the Christian message from the perspective of Dalit reality. For greater strategic power, and in order to generate inertia for the Dalit theological movement, 'counter theology' was the most effective way to firmly establish Dalit theology within the Indian theological scene, raising essential concerns and challenges in the process. Nirmal's call for methodological exclusivism in order to prevent the hegemonic Christian theological tradition absorbing new theological reflections and endeavours of Dalit theologians is well taken. Perhaps the theological 'sacrifice' of M.M. Thomas for the sake of the Dalit voice was worthwhile, certainly in the initial stages of emerging Dalit theology.

Yet the dichotomy does not stand upon too rigid an inspection, leaving us with two choices; to continue to theologise within a rigid dichotomous framework, or to move beyond this framework to assess the possible antecedent contributions of Indian theologians to the cause of liberation of the oppressed in India. While the former creates by definition a communal distinction, the latter position is more conducive to a vision of reconciliation within the theological tradition of India, a goal to which Dalit theology has upheld from its inception. While the former draws rigid lines of demarcation, causing dispute and challenge even among the Dalit community with regard to Dalit identity, the latter opens up the possibility for

dialectic and dialogical approaches in light of the great diversity of context specific theologies.

It is fair to say that the writings of Bishop V. Devasahayam, like Bishop Azariah, indicate a willingness to move beyond the narrow confines of dichotomy. This he does without compromising his critical challenge to the caste system and those theological endeavours which reinforce an oppressive status quo. He confesses that the two theological approaches are not mutually exclusive, admitting that there are elitist thinkers who were critical of the caste system.³⁹ Although he still contends they did not go far enough in rejecting the caste system altogether, this recognition is significant. Ultimately, Devasahayam is critical of all theologians, including Dalit theologians, who participate in oppressive acts, making their theological formulation 'inauthentic'.⁴⁰ Thus, while essentially adopting the counter theology approach established through Nirmal, there is scope in Devasahayam's approach to recognise the contribution of others. It is in this light that a study of M.M. Thomas's theology in relation to the emergence of Dalit theology is merited.

3. The Theology of Thomas and Devasahayam

3.1. Theology and Humanisation

In a context where caste ideology has been responsible for the 'death and destruction' of so many, Devasahayam urges that Christian theology become a vehicle for 'humanisation'.⁴¹ Specific to the Dalit context, humanisation is here interpreted as liberation from the shackles of outcaste inhumanity. It is a holistic humanisation concerned with freedom and self-dignity, and necessarily includes access to basic material resources such as food and water.⁴² This section assesses how Thomas's theology may be interpreted as relevant for emerging Dalit theology

³⁹ V. Devasahayam, "Conflicting Roles of the Bible and Culture in Shaping Indian Theology: A Tale of Two Indian Theologies", p. 23 Devasahayam does not name the theologians he is referring to.

⁴⁰ V. Devasahayam, "The Nature of Dalit Theology as Counter Ideology", V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 59

⁴¹ V. Devasahayam, "Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions", V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 281

⁴² *Ibid.*

concerning the concept of humanisation. While caution is made against underestimating the epistemological and contextual difference between Thomas and Devasahayam, it is argued that M.M. Thomas offered the following significant theological fragments relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology:

3.1.1. Anthropology

M.M. Thomas theologically emphasised the integral relation between theology and anthropology, interpreting human spirituality and salvation as essentially related to the material and social realm.

Bishop Devasahayam acknowledges that M.M. Thomas rejects the false notion that religion and theology are unrelated to the social realities of the world. Devasahayam affirms Thomas's attempt to theologise at the cutting edge of the Word and the World, relating all aspects of social life to the reality of God.⁴³ The question of God and humanity become integrally related in Thomas's theology because of God's redemptive activity through Christ in human history.⁴⁴ Devasahayam quotes Thomas: "Today the question of man is not merely an ethical or an anthropological question. Because the nature and destiny of man is determined ultimately by the question of God - whether there is a God and if there is, what is His will and purpose for men?"⁴⁵ Devasahayam accepts that Thomas considered the 'human' question as fundamental, not only for Christianity, but for other religions and secular ideologies in the modern era. Indeed, for Thomas, this 'common concern' for humanisation as oppose to a 'common religiosity', provided the most effective basis for spiritually penetrating inter-religious and quasi-religious discourse.⁴⁶ Significantly, then, Devasahayam affirms Thomas's concern to hold

⁴³ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, pp. 112-113

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Quote taken from M.M. Thomas, "Significance of the Ecumenical Study of the Humanum for the Church in India", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XC, No. 11, November, 1970, p. 452

⁴⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Bangalore: CISRS & Madras: CLS, 1975, p. vi & xi.

theology and anthropology in necessary tension, shifting continuously from God to human and theology to anthropology.⁴⁷

It was noted in chapter II that although Thomas ultimately viewed salvation in eschatological terms, he regarded spiritual salvation and the task of humanisation to be integrally related.⁴⁸ Referencing Thomas's exegesis of Psalm 144, Devasahayam acknowledges that the human aspiration for health, peace, plenty and justice is related to spiritual salvation. Thus the relationship between God and humanity essentially relates to the human aspiration for personal fulfilment.⁴⁹ This message, notes Devasahayam, is particularly relevant for the search of the oppressed for a fuller life:

M.M. interprets salvation as 'being glorified in the humanity of Jesus Christ' or as 'being incorporated into the glorified humanity of the Risen Christ', and therefore salvation is closely related to the struggles of the oppressed for a richer and fuller human life or to the process of humanization. Salvation is historical, corporate and universal, and eternal life is a present possession since the timeless God has entered time.⁵⁰

Salvation thus has time-bound historical relevance because God has entered into history, revealing in Christ the divine purpose for humanity, giving full credence to the historical process of humanisation. Devasahayam thus acknowledges Thomas's assertion that Christianity essentially relates spiritual salvation to the concept of mature personhood in Jesus within the context the world.⁵¹

3.1.2. Human Freedom

The human person is a transcendent spiritual being within the realm of nature, created free from conformity to religious, cultural or social dogma.

⁴⁷ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 118

⁴⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Bangalore: CISRS & Madras: CLS, 1971, p. 8

⁴⁹ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 115

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119

The human being, notes M.M. Thomas, is a finite creature who belongs necessarily to the natural order along with other created beings. He considers 'consciousness' of involvement in the necessities of organic nature to be a distinct human attribute, essentially making the human a 'spiritual' being.⁵² The human spirit may be understood as 'awareness of selfhood.'⁵³ Although this spirit gives the finite human being 'transcendence' from the natural order, this transcendence is essentially related to the worldly realm, giving humanity a sense of responsibility to fulfill the goals of true humanity, as well as a responsibility to check the betrayal of humanity through the self-alienation of sin.⁵⁴ Involvement in the world is thus given an essential spiritual quality. This involvement is not limited to the realm of necessity, but rather within a "structure of meaning and sacredness which the self in freedom of self-transcendence chooses for itself."⁵⁵ Thus the human being is a 'spirit-nature' unity, a reality which allows Thomas to emphasise the importance of human freedom as an essential component of personhood.⁵⁶ Human participation in the world is affected by the spirit, while spiritual freedom is conditioned by human participation in the natural order: "Neither nature nor spirit has independent existence."⁵⁷

M.M. Thomas disagreed with Gandhi's conception of the human body as alien to the soul.⁵⁸ In an unpublished autobiographical work, *Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility*, Thomas acknowledges that he came to Christ in

⁵² M.M. Thomas, "The Meaning of Salvation Today", T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, p. 85; M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 21

⁵³ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 21

⁵⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Meaning of Salvation Today", p. 85

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ For more on Thomas's reflections on human freedom, see his 1944 essay entitled, "The Human Person", *The Ideological Quest Within My Christian Commitment: 1939-1954*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1983, pp. 107-126; For a discussion on the significance of Freedom in Thomas's theology, see Ken Christoph Miyamoto, *God's Mission in Asia: A Comparative and Contextual Study of This Worldly Holiness and the Theology of Missio Dei in M.M. Thomas and C.S. Song*, Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007, pp. 112-116

⁵⁷ 21 M.M. Thomas, "Man in Society-A Christian View", *Religion and Society*, 1960, p. 53. Here M.M. Thomas is in agreement with Mathew P. John, who wrote, "Nothing that man does can be dissociated from his spirit. Man is not such a combination of spirit and body that certain actions can be considered as exclusively belonging to the body and having no reference to the spirit." Quoted in M.M. Thomas, *The Changing Pattern of Family in India*, Madras: CISRS, 1966, p. 188

⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, "Basic Approaches to Power – Gandhi, Andrews and King" *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVI, No. 3, September, 1969, p. 16. The soul for Gandhi was the essential self of selfhood.

the tradition of pure spirituality and individual piety.⁵⁹ While he does not regret that tradition, he was challenged regarding the one-sidedness of this message: “If Christ rose in the body, the redemption he wrought was not merely of my spirit or soul, but of the whole of me, body, mind, and soul, and of the whole of my relationship to nature and to men.”⁶⁰ Christianity is the religion of the ‘Word made flesh’ which from the earliest times, “did not talk of the immortality of the soul but rather the resurrection of the body; not of the eternity of the spirit, but of the coming of Christ to restore the whole creation. It is not ‘pure spirituality’.”⁶¹

M.M. Thomas thus defines human spirituality as, “the way in which man in freedom of his self-transcendence, seeks a structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness within which he can fulfil or realize himself in and through his involvement in the bodily, the material and in the social realities and relations of his life on earth.”⁶² In this freedom of self-transcendent awareness, however, the human being may choose a false structure of meaning, bringing disintegration of the self in relation to God and humanity.⁶³ The human choice may be in accordance with the purpose of God or the idolatry of self-righteousness. In all human actions in the world, Thomas adds, we are led either by the Spirit of God or by idolatrous spirits opposed to God.⁶⁴

Emphasis on the awareness of selfhood is significant, for it allows Thomas to understand the human being as an identity-conscious being. The human is *denied humanness* if this awareness is denied through imposed dogma or exploitation. Essentially, Thomas interprets the human person as free from conformity to oppressive social systems, including religious, cultural or social dogma which denies humanity. Significantly, Bishop Devasahayam acknowledges Thomas’s reflections

⁵⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility”, Unpublished autobiographical manuscript, UTC Archives, 1972, p. 126

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ M.M. Thomas, “Rediscovery of the Church: Being and Mission”, Sermon preached at the World Council of Churches Assembly, Evanston, 1954. Manuscript, UTC Archives.

⁶² M.M. Thomas, “The Meaning of Salvation Today”, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, Madras: CLS, 1978, p. 179

⁶³ M.M. Thomas, “The Meaning of Salvation Today”, T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, pp. 85-86

⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, “The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in Their Professional and Social Involvement”, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today’s Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore, 1994, p. 58

as important for the human search for ultimate meaning, and thus in the quest for salvation. He writes:

M.M. discerns in the quest a search for the ultimate meaning of human existence and identifies three dimensions of this quest for salvation. First, it involves a desire for selfhood, self-identity and group identity. It points to human awareness of one's selfhood as distinct from nature. 'Only a being which has self-awareness can be called spiritual...It is the distinctive characteristic of being human.'⁶⁵

Of particular interest here is Devasahayam's observation that Thomas relates identity consciousness to the realm of human spirituality and existence. From its inception Dalit theology has aimed at raising Dalit identity consciousness as an essential step in the process of liberation, thus rejecting the historical denial of humanness as outcastes, empowering Dalits to struggle against dehumanisation and injustice. Relevant here is Thomas's insight that "the revolt for justice is related to the awareness among the people that society is not determined by fate but is made by people and therefore can be changed by them."⁶⁶

Identity consciousness is thus considered a necessary step to overcoming oppressive customs afforded traditional religious sanction. The discovery of individual personality and freedom from the state, society and religion, notes Thomas, becomes an essential dynamic for 'radical social change.'⁶⁷ Devasahayam agrees with Thomas, acknowledging that human freedom and rationality are necessary for rejecting and overcoming oppressive forces. Referencing Thomas, he writes: "Humans become truly human when they are able to think for themselves, after being freed from all oppressive dogmas and values that are forced upon them, and to pursue independently a course of historical action not controlled by others."⁶⁸ Freedom from oppressive dogmas comes from awareness of human selfhood as a spiritual being integrally related to the created world.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115

⁶⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 12

⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, "Patterns of Modern Man's search for Salvation", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No. 2, June, 1964, p. 10

⁶⁸ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 114

3.1.3. Human Dignity

Human dignity is an essential feature of humanness. During a personal interview, Bishop Devasahayam stressed the Dalit theological concern for ‘dignity’ as an essential component of humanness, based on the faith affirmation that each individual is created in God’s image.⁶⁹ While emphasising that poverty and hunger are important existential and theological issues to be addressed, he views the fight against human indignity to be the fundamental concern.⁷⁰ Indeed, Devasahayam suggests that concern for poverty by traditional theologians without due recognition of human dignity has served as a distraction from the root problem of caste:

The two main concerns of the traditional theologians were poverty and religiosity. I am saying poverty, yes. But more than poverty what strikes at me is my denial of human dignity. I said I would rather starve and stand on my feet than to be fed on my knees... What is it that you are talking poverty, poverty, poverty? You are insulting me, by distracting my real problem to something else.⁷¹

Devasahayam passionately argues: “We realise that human dignity is more important than food and that it is better to go hungry on our feet, than to be fully fed on our knees. Hunger with dignity is preferable to food in disgrace.”⁷² Human indignity is thus a central feature of Dalit theological experience and reflection. Denial of dignity is a denial of basic humanity and thus a violation of the image of God.⁷³

Bishop Devasahayam suggests that M.M. Thomas was correct in identifying categories of ‘oppressed’ and ‘oppressor’, but critical of Thomas’s narrow use of Marxian economic categories in making this distinction, neglecting the ‘original sin’ of caste system in India.⁷⁴ Certainly Thomas was influenced by Marxist social and

⁶⁹ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Devasahayam continues in reference to the religiosity of Hinduism: “What is your nonsense talk about religiosity of this country – the religiosity that made one fourth of the people less than animals? What religion are you talking about?”

⁷² V. Devasahayam, “New Thrusts in Dalit Theology”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 43

⁷³ V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre, 1998, p. 5

⁷⁴ Interview, Bishop Devasahayam.

economic analysis, perceiving the struggle against unjust structures as a struggle against poverty. Yet placing Thomas too rigidly in the Marxian camp fails to adequately portray Thomas's theological position. Thomas cautions against the exclusive use of economic categories of classical Marxism, a position which he considered inadequate for the Indian context. Significantly, Thomas understood poverty to be essentially related to daily indignities experienced by the people resulting from victimisation as a result of power-structures entrenched in social, cultural and religious institutions.⁷⁵ Thomas recognises that economic uplift alone fails to appreciate the Dalit quest for human dignity. Writing on the awakening of the Indian people to a new sense of self-identity,⁷⁶ Thomas clearly recognises the significance of human dignity as an essential component of true personhood:

Where self is involved, there personhood is involved: spirit also is involved. That is why we have to talk of [the people's awakening] as a spiritual awakening. Spirit and self go together. Spirituality is the way we manage the self-consciousness. Of course it is also a materialistic awakening, because people, when they become awake ask for bread to live. But it is not just to satisfy their hunger that they are asking for bread, but that material thing itself is taken up as part of the awakening to the dignity of their personhood. Some people believe that if you give bread to the people they will all be satisfied. No. Because it is as part of their self-awakening to human dignity that they want to overcome hunger. Bread is sought as an integral part of justice to their human dignity. Hunger is not merely a material thing, it is a material means of expressing the self-awakening.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ M.M. Thomas, *et al.* "Caste, Class and Power-Structure", Editorial, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXI, No. 3, 1974, p. 2. M.M. Thomas has been criticized by Dalit Theologian Dr. John Mohan Razu for his affinity with 'leftist ideology', an ideology which had done little to help the struggle of the Dalits. The criticism of Communist/Marxist ideology for failing the Dalits has been noted by A.M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel in his article, "The Ideological Nature of The Emerging Dalit Consciousness", Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991, pp. 87-92. Indeed Thomas was aware of the necessity but the limitations of all ideologies, including Marxism. See, M.M. Thomas, "Towards a Christian Social Philosophy", *Student Outlook*, Geneva: SCM, February-March, 1946.

⁷⁶ In his article, "The Power that Sustains Us" Thomas refers specifically to the awakening of the Naga tribes, but makes mention of other groups in India, including lower caste groups and women. M.M. Thomas, "The Power that Sustains Us", M.M. Thomas, *The Church's Mission and Post-Modern Humanism: Collection of Essays and Talks, 1992-96*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71

It is argued, therefore, that the struggle for humanity in Thomas's writing essentially includes a struggle for human dignity. When people ask for bread, he suggests, they ask for something far greater; human dignity as a human being.⁷⁸ The awakening of the self is a spiritual awakening to true personhood rooted in human dignity. The call for bread is a response to this awakening, in recognition that dignity demands the overcoming of human degradation, oppression and poverty. He writes:

There is a search for overcoming poverty. But it is not just to overcome poverty, but to really overcome the destruction of selfhood, of personhood which poverty points to. Our humanity is destroyed by poverty and therefore it is for the sake of justice to our humanity that we want bread. We do not want to take the question of bread merely as a commodity. Bread is an expression of selfhood.⁷⁹

Although the Dalit Christian perspective is grounded and shaped by the experience of pathos, and thus distinct from Thomas's personal experience, it is argued that Thomas's theological enquiry viewed human dignity as an essential condition of human identity and selfhood. Indeed Devasahayam resonates clearly with Thomas when he observes: "The ability of humans to speak and to walk erect have been interpreted as marks of human dignity. We are truly human when we are able to hold our heads high in pride and affirm self-identity with the freedom of self-expression."⁸⁰ Dignity is a vital component of humanness. The clear theological resonance supports the thesis that Thomas contributed significant theological fragments relevant for emerging Dalit theology.

3.2. Theology and Justice

The concept of justice lies at the heart of Dalit theology. As Bishop Devasahayam observes: "Dalit theology seeks to promote values of liberty, equality,

⁷⁸ M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel", David Lyon & Albert Manuel, *Renewal for Mission*, Madras: CLS, 1968, p. 99

⁷⁹ "The Power that Sustains Us", M.M. Thomas, *The Church's Mission and Post-Modern Humanism: Collection of Essays and Talks, 1992-96*, p. 71

⁸⁰ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 115

fraternity, freedom, community etc. It maintains the priority of justice over order and seeks to establish a community of peace, well-being and justice for all.”⁸¹

Devasahayam acknowledges that justice is an integral component of humanisation and thus central to the creation of an authentic Dalit theology. In line with other Liberation theologies the unique starting point for Dalit reflection on justice is the experience of ‘injustice’.⁸² Devasahayam argues that the Dalits, women, poor, and tribals of India face the daily realities of social, economic and cultural inequality whilst remaining outside the power structures, unable to participate in the decision making process of transformation of society.⁸³ Dalit theology, as a theology rooted in the experiential and contextual reality of injustice, offers a unique and essential voice to discourse on justice. As justice is central to Dalit theology I shall, in this section, examine Thomas’s theological reflections on justice.

Clearly we are entering important but abstract territory. That Thomas was concerned with the concept of justice is not questioned, but this in itself is not sufficient to suggest he made a theological contribution to an emerging Dalit theology. Indeed ‘justice’ understood as a philosophical concept relating to the ‘ideal state of humanity’⁸⁴ remains highly contentious, generating diverse political and social theory and debate.⁸⁵ Duncan Forrester observes that “both knowing what justice is and doing justice are inherently and deeply problematic”,⁸⁶ adding:

⁸¹ V. Devasahayam, “Doing Dalit Theology: Basic Assumptions”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 282

⁸² Karen Lebacqz argues that the initial point of discourse on justice is the reality of ‘injustice’. She writes: “If justice begins with a correction of injustices, then the most important tools for understanding justice will be the stories of injustice as experienced by the oppressed”. Karen Lebacqz, “Implications for a Theory of Justice”, Boulton, Kennedy & Verhey (eds.) *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994, p. 254. For a critical reading of theories of justice from the liberation perspective, see, Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986

⁸³ V. Devasahayam, “Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas’s Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 118

⁸⁴ Wikipedia Encyclopaedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justice>.

⁸⁵ For an introduction into the complexity of the political and social concept of justice see, Andrew Haywood, *Political Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd Edition, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, ch. 10; John Scott & Gordon Marshall, ed. *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*, 3rd Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 329-332

⁸⁶ Duncan Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, Introduction, p. 1

The problem is that too many people and groups have too many differing and often contradictory accounts of justice. Too many people think that they know what justice is, and usually they understand justice in a way that suits their individual or collective interests... Ideas of justice are wrought into weapons to be used in social conflict; each side claims that their side is just; and there is no arbitrator or judge to resolve the matter.⁸⁷

The task of this section is to determine how Thomas's reflections on justice may be understood as offering significant theological signposts for Dalit theology. While he did not develop a substantive theory of justice, he regarded justice as an *essential component of humanisation* and thus of *fundamental theological importance*.

3.2.1. Justice within relationship

Karen Lebacqz suggests that justice is nothing less than 'right relationship' or 'righteousness', and may be located in 'responsibilities and mutuality' of persons in relationship to one another. A breakdown of relationships leads to exploitation and injustice. She argues:

The primary injustice is therefore exploitation. Domination and oppression are injustices because they are violations of a covenant of mutual responsibility. They violate the relationship and violate the personhood of *both* parties. The victim is clearly violated. But just as surely, the perpetrator of injustice fails to live according to God's covenant and therefore violates her or his own personhood. When an injustice is done, the entire human community experiences a breach of covenant.⁸⁸

Lebacqz's articulation of injustice as exploitative relationship is helpful in allowing us to identify a link between Thomas and Devasahayam. Above we observed Devasahayam's affirmation that justice is integral to humanisation, understood in terms of relationship to God and to one another in community. Right relationship involves equality and fraternity, while wrong relationship nurtures exploitation and oppression.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41

⁸⁸ Karen Lebacqz, "Implications for a Theory of Justice", Boulton, Kennedy & Verhey (eds.) *From Christ to the World: Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics*, p. 257

In Chapter II the significance of ‘relationship’ in Thomas’s theology was noted. God’s redemptive action within history, most notably through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, reveals God’s purpose for humanity in terms of mutual forgiveness and loving community. Thus relationship between human beings in society became a primary theological focus. Just community is a community of persons living in right relationship with God and with one another, based on mutual human forgiveness and responsibility to one another in dignity and respect, and founded in love.

Bishop Devasahayam acknowledges that Thomas’s primary theological concern is not with questions of divine omnipotence or omnipresence of God, but rather with God’s ‘loving relationship’ to the world and humanity. Given the reality of exploitative and oppressive relations in Indian society as a result of caste, Devasahayam affirms Thomas’s question, “What is God doing in this context?” appreciating Thomas’s recognition that God is concerned with the ‘least and the last’ in society.⁸⁹ Indeed, Thomas’s theology urged human collaboration in the divine quest, seeking transformation of society in line with God’s concern for human beings in community. Thus theology and anthropology are held together in necessary tension in order to understand the nature, purpose and divine destiny of humanity. Thomas, notes Devasahayam, sees in the revolutions of contemporary India a providential endeavour to create the basic conditions necessary for human dignity, creativity, and mature human community.⁹⁰ He continues by affirming Thomas’s reflections on the two-fold task of Christianity in India; firstly as a message of spiritual salvation which brings every person to maturity of personhood in Jesus Christ; secondly as an influence and power enabling the transformation of society into a “community of persons set in a relation of freedom, justice and love”.⁹¹ Right relationship based on a theological understanding of divine-human relationship and a relationship of equality, justice and love, thus demonstrate a significant point of resonance between Thomas and Devasahayam.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 118-119

3.2.2. Individual and corporate morality and responsibility

The theological concept of person-in-community is central to Thomas's thought, which holds in necessary tension the individual and corporate dimensions of human existence. We have already ascertained that Thomas rejects a lopsided Christian emphasis on individual pietism at the expense of corporate responsibility. He is concerned that individual pietism is a common Christian approach to spirituality, viewing "professional and social involvement as God's call to uphold personal moral integrity supported by personal religion which does not give spiritual meaning to the profession itself."⁹² While such an attitude may lead to personal moral integrity, there is also a danger of separating individual morality from corporate morality and responsibility.

Dalit theologian John Mohan Razu challenges the isolation of individual morality from corporate morality and responsibility. Focusing on individual morality and piety, he argues, the individual finds justifying strategies, such as personal tithing, personal reading of Scripture, or personal prayer, which satisfy personal guilt and shame but have little impact in the professional and corporate structures. The 'personal', he adds, must be understood to 'in relation' to something else, for the individual is "wrapped up in the corporate structure of society."⁹³ Mohan Razu cites the example of a Christian working for the World Bank, refusing to speak against the injustice of corporate policy that continues to victimise the poor because he/she feels absolved from corporate responsibility.⁹⁴ Mohan Razu urges that the Church reject any disconnect between individual and corporate dimensions of human responsibility in order that unjust systems and structures may be challenged. This position is resonant in Thomas, who writes:

To be morally uncorrupt as an individual Christian is good so far as it goes. But it is too narrow an approach which isolates the individual morality from the corporate morality and theological significance of the profession or social field in which the individual is involved. In Christian faith we have to deal with the

⁹² M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore College, 1994, p. 39

⁹³ Lecture notes taken during a class on "Issues in Response to Poverty", UTC, 14th November, 2005.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

total person in the totality of his professional and social involvement; which means we are concerned with the human person as a bodily social spiritual being searching for meaning and direction for their involvement in corporate life.⁹⁵

In order to reclaim the corporate dimension of faith, Thomas suggests that the New Testament must be read as integrally related to the Old Testament. The Old Testament is concerned with the corporate life of the people, in particular the people of Israel, while the New Testament goes further in emphasising universal concern for all people, demonstrating how the world of persons is related to the world of nature, social institutions and culture.⁹⁶ Christian theology must, therefore, be concerned with God's purpose for the 'corporate totality', the inter-related nature of the personal, social and cosmic dimensions of reality: "It is only in this framework of the inter-relation of the personal, social and cosmic within the totality, that the nature of the Christian's professional, social and churchly involvement can acquire direction."⁹⁷ Social justice is understood by Thomas to be located within this inter-connected framework, guiding personal participation and responsibility in the wider context of corporate life.

3.2.3. Liberating justice as a creative human vocation

The Biblical narrative is a key source for Thomas's reflections upon justice. In creation humanity is granted the gift of creativity as a means of 'being and becoming human', building human community rooted in fellowship with God and one another.⁹⁸ Thus Thomas regards 'creative development' as a divinely sanctioned human attribute, as affirmed by the Adamic covenant. Despite the judgement of sin God sought to preserve the fallen world through the covenant with Noah, giving divine sanction to liberating justice. This sanction was further reinforced through the Mosaic Law and the Old Testament prophets. Thomas writes:

Here there is a corresponding human vocation of participating in the Divine activity of preserving the fallen world under the rule of

⁹⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, p. 39

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41

law and social justice expressing the reverence for life and moral dignity of the human being as made in the image of God. To the human vocation of developmental creativity is now added the human vocation of liberating creativity.⁹⁹

Justice in the sinful world at this stage could at best be established through a ‘balance of power’ through law.¹⁰⁰ Thomas asks whether humanity will ever be redeemed from “self-centredness...making possible a community of perfect love.”¹⁰¹ The answer comes in the form of the divine promise made with Abraham, a promise of redemption which gives humanity ‘ultimate hope of humanness.’¹⁰² Hope does not reduce the need for a struggle for justice in a sinful world, but makes the struggle endurable.¹⁰³ Significantly, the call to participate in the struggle for justice is not replaced by the redemptive covenant with Abraham, but becomes an essential part of this redemptive covenant:

The Abrahamic covenant does not replace the Adamic and Noahic covenants, but takes them to itself. It is certainly a characteristic of the whole Old Testament that it sees the redemptive covenant and its history in the setting and the interaction with the covenants of Creation and Preservation of the world, thereby giving the human vocation of creative development and of struggle for justice in the fallen world a Divine sanction and therefore spiritual and theological significance in relation to the ultimate fulfilment of God’s purpose.¹⁰⁴

Interpreting Psalm 144:13-15 as a vision of ultimate redemption, Thomas observes that social justice is an essential complement to material productivity in order that there may be “no cry of distress in our streets” (vs. 14).¹⁰⁵ Economic abundance, justice and peace in the life of the people within a community are

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 45

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ M.M. Thomas writes: “It is this hope that makes the various ambiguities endurable...even in the history of the people of Israel, which is in one sense divine activity of redemption, the responsibilities and ambiguities of development and justice are not removed.” *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47

¹⁰⁵ Psalm 144: 13-15: “May our barns be filled, with produce of every kind; may our sheep increase by thousands, by tens of thousands in our fields. And may our cattle be heavy with young. May there be no breach of the walls, no exile, and no cry of distress in our streets. Happy are the people to whom such blessings fall; happy are the people whose God is the Lord.” New Revised Standard Version.

considered ‘interdependent aspects of a people’s blessedness’, demanding that prosperity be accompanied by a sense of community justice:¹⁰⁶

When there is prosperity, unless it is accompanied by a sense of community justice, oppression and the cry of the oppressed will appear. If the cry is not heeded for long, the poor will revolt at some point and it will find expression in breaking down of the walls of the barns of the rich resulting in a breakdown of law and order...So if prosperity is to become a true blessing of God to the people, there should be justice and peace based on concern and responsibility for each other in community. With economic abundance, we need to develop a greater sense of the common good so that justice and peace should always go together in the life of the people. They are interdependent aspects of a people’s blessedness.¹⁰⁷

Bishop Devasahayam agrees with Thomas that the quest for justice finds theological justification in the Biblical witness of God in history working for the salvation of the people in terms of liberation and humanisation. He demonstrates a clear theological link with M.M. Thomas when he writes: “Sin is understood in its corporate expression as obstacles for humanization and the removal of obstacles is understood as salvation...Without socio-political liberation, humans cannot worship God and without the goal of worshipping God, socio-political justice will be incomplete.”¹⁰⁸ Here the integral relationship between God and the divine purpose of liberation within the context of the world is emphasised. Justice is essentially related to liberation and is a determining factor for true community, a reality which has theological credence within Thomas’s Biblical understanding of God.

Bishop Devasahayam demonstrates further resonance with Thomas when he observes that the Biblical God is a law giver, demonstrating that justice is an inalienable divine right. God is opposed to any form of structural injustice, including caste, class and patriarchy.¹⁰⁹ God’s justice essentially relates to the welfare of the human person as a spiritual and a physical being in the world. This is resonant with

¹⁰⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Blessedness of a People”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, Tiruvalla: CSS & Delhi: ISPCK, 1994, p. 50

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ V. Devasahayam, “Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas’s Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 119

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

Thomas, who writes that failure to recognize the integral relation of the material, including the quest for justice and transformed community, from the spiritual, is unacceptable:

[w]e cannot accept a spirituality unrelated to justice in society and love in community and to the renewal of the earth. All this because ultimately the self-awakening we witness today is the search for the dignity of personhood and for a society which recognizes persons and justice to persons in the functional orders of life like economics, family, community etc.¹¹⁰

Devasahayam acknowledges God's compassion to the victims of oppression in the Old Testament. God hears the cries of the weak, liberates the people, and establishes a covenantal code which calls for the establishment of justice within the community. Failure to act justly to the weak, the alien, the widow and the poor therefore goes against the divine purpose for true community, bringing divine judgement: "If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; my wrath will burn and I will kill you with the sword and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans." (Ex. 22:23-24)¹¹¹ The experience of the Exodus, for Devasahayam, demonstrates that God is not merely a comforting presence, but is both an 'instigating presence' and an 'empowering presence' for the people in the struggle for liberation and justice.¹¹² Once again Devasahayam's thought is resonant with Thomas. Both recognise the significance of justice in terms of divine instigation and purpose, and the need to interpret the covenantal laws as relevant for a community of justice.

While the Old Testament speaks of creation and preservation within the context of the promise of redemption in the Law, Thomas notes that the New Testament speaks of development and justice within the context of the redemptive power present in the community of forgiveness under the Cross of Christ.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ M.M. Thomas, "The Power that Sustains Us", *The Church's Mission and Post-Humanism: Collection of Essays and Talks 1992-1996*, Tiruvalla: CSS & Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 76

¹¹¹ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost; M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 120

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, p. 52

‘Development’ and ‘justice’ thus remain divinely sanctioned components for building and transforming community in line with the message of New Humanity in Christ. Referencing Thomas, Devasahayam writes:

Jesus heralded the end of the present unjust kingdom and announced the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in his person and ministry. M.M. interprets Jesus Christ and the New Humanity “as the spiritual foundation of renewal and ultimate fulfilment of the struggles of mankind today for its humanity”...He also maintains, “As New Man, Christ becomes the drawing power of hope and as the true Man he becomes the touchstone or criterion of what man should be.”¹¹⁴

Devasahayam, in line with Thomas, interprets Christ in terms of fulfilment of the prophetic voice towards the establishment of God’s just rule. Indeed, Christ proclaims that the prophetic voice of Isaiah (42:1-3) has been fulfilled in Him, bringing ‘salvation’ for the poor and deliverance for the needy.”¹¹⁵ Both Thomas and Devasahayam affirm that God’s justice is established in Christ, recognising the divine sanction that all are born equally in God’s image, and that there is divine condemnation of “distinctions of high and low, great and least.”¹¹⁶

M.M. Thomas’s recognition of divine solidarity with the oppressed and the call for humanity to participate in the transformation of society is also affirmed by Devasahayam:

Jesus not only proclaimed God’s love for the last and the least but also practised it. Jesus’ life and work clearly established his decisive solidarity with the last and the least. Jesus Christ is the New Man through whom a New Humanity is created after the image of God (Col. 3:10). He is the true Adam through whom all mankind is continuously reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:19), and all creation is being perfected (Rom. 8:8-21). He bears the movement of the Spirit leading to the ultimate future of God’s relation to man

¹¹⁴ V. Devasahayam, “Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas’s Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 121. M.M. Thomas’s quotes taken from, *Salvation and Humanization*, p. 4 &, *The Secular Ideologies and the Meaning of Christ*, p. 116.

¹¹⁵ Luke (4:18-21). V. Devasahayam, “Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas’s Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 122

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and nature, the consummation of the Kingdom where 'God shall be all in all' (1 Cor. 15:20-28; Eph. 1:1-16)¹¹⁷

The theological framework of creation-fall-redemption-consummation, and the New Humanity offered in Christ for the fulfilment of a community of equality and justice demonstrate significant points of theological resonance between Devasahayam and Thomas. Certainly specificity to Dalit context demands a critical sharpening of Thomas's broad theological contribution. Yet it is evident that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological reflections relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology.

3.2.4. Christian hope and the liberating power of the Cross and Resurrection

M.M. Thomas was influenced by the Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, in particular Niebuhr's emphasis on sin, and justice as a coercive quest for balance of power in an imperfect world.¹¹⁸ Indeed Thomas asserts the need for coercion and struggle to attain power, conscious that the pursuit of justice is at best the pursuit of 'relative' or 'partial' justice as a result of the 'perversity of sin'.¹¹⁹ He writes:

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123 See, M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Madras: CLS, 1975, p. 129

¹¹⁸ See, D.B. Robertson, ed. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1957, pp. 27-40; Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I & II, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996

¹¹⁹ M.M. Thomas, "A Christian View of Society", *Religion and Society*, 1960, p. 60. Thomas acknowledges the necessity but also the limits of law and politics in the pursuit of justice: Legal justice and political liberation are essential expressions and signs of our hope in the ultimate redemption of the world from sin and death, but they can never comprehend and realise that redemption within the framework of law and politics. See, M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, Bishop Joshi Memorial Lectures, Bombay: BUILD, 1984, p. 27

Since human society is essentially persons-in-community, love is the ultimate moral basis of society. But because of the spiritual self-alienation of humans, one has to reckon with a tough human self-centredness which appears as self-righteous moralism on the one hand and crude selfishness on the other. The perfect love-ethic, while it remains the ultimate criterion of ethical judgment is impossible to fulfil in the natural state.¹²⁰

Thus Thomas acknowledges the need for a 'second level' of morality, a morality of law through the 'coercive institution of the State' to enforce legal justice.¹²¹ Here there seems to be a significant point of departure between M.M. Thomas and Dalit Christian theologians, for there is a marked difference between a theology which seeks a coercive balance of power given the reality of individual and corporate sin, and a theological position of hope in Christ which urges transformation of society towards full humanisation and justice.¹²² Methodologically it is helpful to locate Thomas between the 'realist' position of Reinhold Niebuhr and 'hope' in the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, as M.M. Thomas was influenced by both during his theological life.¹²³ For Dalit theology the difference is significant, for it marks a distinction between attaining power in the interest of balancing conflicting interests and working towards transformation and renewal from an oppressive system. Yet I argue that although Thomas held 'realism' and 'hope' in necessary tension, his theology emphasised the power of the resurrected Christ as a present reality for the transformation of society.

Transformation of society meant, for Thomas, a rebuilding of structures of society and State built upon a spiritual foundation which recognised personal dignity and freedom from oppressive structures. Indeed he considered such a transformation as requiring a 'spirituality for combat' in order to challenge the principalities and powers, including the 'demon of caste':

¹²⁰ M.M. Thomas, "The Quest for a Human Community in a Religiously Pluralistic World – What Does it Mean for the Being and Doing of the Church?", *The Church's Mission and Post-Modern Humanism: Collection of Essays and Talks, 1992-1996*, Tiruvalla: CSS & Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 150

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1986; Duncan Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997

¹²³ See, Robert Thomas Cornelson's published Thesis, *The Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and The Political Theology of Jürgen Moltmann in Dialogue: The Realism of Hope*, San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992.

It is a spirituality for combat against the spirituality of idolatry which gives spiritual sanction to oppressive and unjust structures. Caste, feudalism, capitalism, communalism and denominationalism derive their strength not only from economic interests, but also from spiritual sanctions behind them, e.g. Caste system and traditional religion. Nehru called it the 'demon of caste'. Unjust structures have great strength because of the 'demons' or what St. Paul calls the 'principalities and powers' the structures of the idolatrous system which sustains them. Here there is a need to take a stand on the victory of Christ over principalities and powers in the combat to transform society.¹²⁴

The realist influence in Thomas cautions against an easy optimism in the struggle for just society. It is worth, however, noting Duncan Forrester's caution that Niebuhr's Realism,

[c]ould easily deteriorate into an accommodation with the status quo and a cynical assumption that politics is simply the struggle between self-interested groups and justice no more than temporary and fragile equilibrium between conflicting interests. It proved easy for this understanding of justice to free itself from any kind of theological control, so that love as the impossible but relevant ideal disappeared over the horizon and justice became...the interest of the stronger.¹²⁵

M.M. Thomas's theological position goes some way to heeding Forrester's caution, asserting hope in the creative possibilities for transformation of society towards justice in the divinely sanctioned process of humanisation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ, he argues, "guarantees the Christian hope of a final consummation of the purpose of God for society and it saves Christian social realism from falling into cynicism or defeatism in working for justice in society and state."¹²⁶ Hope in Christ becomes not merely a hope for the future, but in the death and resurrection of Christ is a present reality through the power of forgiveness under the Cross.¹²⁷ It is

¹²⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Development Situation", September, 1976. UTC Archive, Bangalore.

¹²⁵ Duncan Forrester, *Christian Justice and Public Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 219

¹²⁶ M.M. Thomas, "A Christian View of Society", *Religion and Society*, 1960, p. 57

¹²⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement", in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today's Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore College, 1994, p. 52

this hope which empowers and sustains participation in the process of transformation.¹²⁸

For M.M. Thomas, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ created a new power in which new humanity can emerge.¹²⁹ It is here that Divine forgiveness for sinful humanity can be found, a power which becomes the power of the New Age, dynamically present in the penultimate reality of the world.¹³⁰ As an example, Thomas argued that through such power, politics itself could be redeemed and thus transformed. Reflecting on an article written thirty-two years earlier, entitled, “Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy”, Thomas notes:

There was a time when I thought that the New Age of Christ was so much beyond history that it could be experienced in politics only as forgiveness and not as power, that political philosophy could be only a philosophy of sinful necessities where the Cross was relevant only as forgiveness to the politician, and not as qualifying politics, political parties, techniques and institutions as such...But certain questions remained with me: Can Christ only judge politics? Can he not also in some measure redeem it here and now? Cannot forgiveness be realized as power in the structures of the collective and institutional life of man in society?¹³¹

The power of divine forgiveness, therefore, is the power in which Christians are to co-work in the world with the resurrected Christ towards freedom, justice, dignity and equality as a fellowship of persons-in-community.¹³²

Despite the power available in Christ to participate in the struggle for transformation, however, Thomas is critical that the Church in India is content to

¹²⁸ Jurgen Moltmann writes: “There are two different attitudes towards the future. The one always considers the worst case. If the worst occurs, then one is correct; if it does not occur, then one can rejoice. The second always hopes for the best. If it does not occur, then one is disappointed; if it does occur, then one can be happy. *I would rather be disappointed a thousand times, than surrender the hope of a better future. ‘Where there is no vision, the people will perish’* (Proverbs 29:18). Foreword, Robert Thomas Cornelson, *The Christian Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr and The Political Theology of Jurgen Moltmann in Dialogue: The Realism of Hope*, San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992, p. v.

¹²⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Love Your Enemies”, Sermon Manuscript, March 12, 1969. UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹³⁰ M.M. Thomas, “The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formulation of a True Secular Humanism”, *Student World*, 2nd Quarter, 1953, p. 140

¹³¹ M.M. Thomas, “Christian Social Thought and Action – A Necessary Tragedy: Reflections after Thirty Two Years”, T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvulla: CSS, 2002, p. 26

¹³² M.M. Thomas, “The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formulation of a True Secular Humanism”, p. 135

support the status quo of traditional power structures in a bid to secure communal securities, despite the fact that the majority of its people are poor. The Church consequently fails to act as agents for social transformation and justice on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.¹³³ In agreement with the Faith and Order conference on the ‘Unity of the Church and the Unity of Mankind’, Thomas affirms that the Christ of the Eucharist is the Christ of the poor, and that “the struggle for social justice belongs to the *esse* of the Church.”¹³⁴ Thomas did not seek accommodation with traditional structures of caste, considering caste system as a ‘violent institution’,¹³⁵ but rather sought new spiritual foundations for the transformation of post-independent Indian society. Thomas did not advocate accommodation but rather *transformation*, affirming with the Nairobi Assembly of the WCC that the struggle against oppression and injustice necessitates “confrontation with power and the handling of power.”¹³⁶ As noted in Chapter III, Thomas writes that reconciliation has been made cheaply, urging that Christianity becomes a messenger of strife in a world of false peace.¹³⁷

Once more M.M. Thomas stresses that the struggle for justice is made possible through the Cross and resurrection of Christ:

The Hope of the coming of the Kingdom of God and His Christ is not a reason for escape from action today, but rather it is the ground of historical responsibility, [enabling us to] struggle for social transformation even in the face of great odds because of the ultimate hope. This future-orientation is necessary that we may not accept the existing structures as God-given...It is necessary to start from the End viz. the Kingdom to come to bring dynamic change into the present.¹³⁸

The role of the Christian Church is to be a sign and foretaste of the Kingdom to come, seeking to translate its eschatological hope “into partial but real time-bound historical hopes.”¹³⁹ Thus Thomas asserts that the Gospel must be presented in India

¹³³ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, p. 15

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51

¹³⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Development Situation”, Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore, 1976, p. 3

¹³⁹ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 25

as “the source or renewal of social institutions and structures.”¹⁴⁰ This source for renewal is also the power for renewal.

That transformation of society is a central feature of Dalit theology is clear. Bishop Devasahayam affirms with Thomas that an authentic feature of humanity is the ability to participate in God’s creation for the development of just and equal community: “It is participation that makes us authentically human and guarantees our participation in God’s ongoing activity.”¹⁴¹ Yet, as a result of the ‘Gospel of slavery’ constituted by Hinduism, Dalits have been historically denied a participatory role in creation and thus denied their authentic humanity.¹⁴² Given the reality of injustice and oppression the Dalit struggle against injustice demands participation in the struggle to create a ‘new and humane world order.’¹⁴³ The power for such participation comes in recognising Dalit human identity through the experience of divine grace. A people who were once considered a ‘no-people’ now affirm that they are ‘God’s people’ (1 Peter 2:10).¹⁴⁴ This experience of grace, notes Devasahayam, “not only transforms us, but conscripts us to work for the transformation of society.”¹⁴⁵ Here he refers specifically to a transformation of society from caste system: “No social system in the world has reduced humans to the levels of less than animals as the caste system in India has. No person could bear adequate testimony to the experience of divine grace and the transformative power of the Gospel, as much as Dalits in India.”¹⁴⁶ The foremost task in the process of liberation of the oppressed people is the need to vision a new future, for it is this vision of transformed society that precedes social revolution.¹⁴⁷

This is not to suggest, however, that Dalit Christian theologians pursue a utopian dream beyond the realms of realism. As Felix Wilfred observes:

¹⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, “The Ecumenical Movement and Christian Social Thought in India” 1960. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

¹⁴¹ V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp*, Chennai: Gurukul Theological College and Research Institute, 1998, p. 7

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ 1 Peter 2:10: “Once you were no people but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy.” V. Devasahayam, “Formative Factors of Dalit Theology”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 8

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp*, p. 14

Utopia is not an unreal figment of imagination, or a chimera we chase in futility. It is the projection of another order of things, a different set of values, and a new shape of the world and society. The suppressed identities, women, minorities of every kind, Dalits and tribals and all those who are marginalised in any way, project their utopias.¹⁴⁸

The struggle towards transformation of society requires a vision of what that society will look like. It is not a 'chimera chased in futility' but rather a vision of something new, pursued by the people in their daily lives.

It is clear that transformation of society in the quest for true humanity and justice was a central theological concern for Thomas. While Thomas held Realism and Hope in necessary theological tension, the Cross and Resurrection of Christ provided the theological grounding for empowerment and hope in the participative struggle for transformation. This position is clearly resonant with emerging Dalit theology, which seeks a theological basis for transformation, not accommodation, with traditional and existing power structures.

3.2.5. Contextual discernment and biblical hermeneutics

The concept of 'contextualisation' remains an age-old and continuous cause of tension within theological debate. We have already identified briefly the concern to 'indigenize' Christianity within the Indian context, a concern which led to varied attempts to interpret Christianity through Brahminic philosophy. The difficulty in such attempts arises through diverse and conflicting assumptions as to what constitutes Indian context. Questions such as 'whose context?' and 'who is excluded?' thus become essential questions for theological discourse. Indeed the emergence of Dalit theology is understood as a call for authentic contextualisation from the perspective of the outcaste and the oppressed. It is thus a rejection of the notion that Indian context equates to Brahminic Hindu culture. When we consider the concept of justice in a situation of contextual plurality, it is clear that a universal theory becomes problematic. M.M. Thomas was aware of this problem. While he offered no grand theory of justice, he held biblical hermeneutics and context in

¹⁴⁸ Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, p. 14

necessary tension within theological discourse on justice. It is argued that this tension remains essentially relevant to Dalit theological discourse.

The Bible, for Thomas, provides a framework for understanding the ultimate purpose of humanity as revealed in the ‘mighty acts’ of God culminating in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁹ As a lay theologian he sought to theologise in the “frontiers between religion and society exploring and trying to communicate Biblical insights for people in analyzing and changing society.”¹⁵⁰ The Bible, for Thomas, is thus an essential source of knowledge providing the “power to make us wise and lead us to a salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).¹⁵¹ Thomas makes reference to the World Conference on Church and Society, which states that Christian discernment requires, “‘a disciplined exercise in continual dialogue with biblical resources, the mind of the Church through history and today, and the best insights of social scientific analysis’, followed by a daring ‘act upon this world to the best of one’s knowledge’ which that discernment brings.”¹⁵²

M.M. Thomas rejects the popular conception that the Bible offers a solution to diverse contemporary contextual situations, which ‘leads us nowhere’.¹⁵³ Instead he urges a disciplined dialogue between the Bible and analysis of the specific context. While Thomas does not specifically refer to Dalits or caste, the integral relation between context and Biblical hermeneutics remains significant. Certainly for Devasahayam the specificity of caste to Indian context determines theological praxis and reflection, including the struggle to overcome Dalit injustice as a result of the caste system. Dalit theology thus called for a re-reading of the Bible from a Dalit perspective.¹⁵⁴ Indeed Devasahayam’s greatest contribution to Dalit theology is his array of contextual Bible studies, which highlight the need to read the text from a Dalit perspective.¹⁵⁵ While rightly cautioning against uncritical reductionism of

¹⁴⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement”, in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today’s Context*, p. 40

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 40

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. xiii-xiv

¹⁵⁵ See, V. Devasahayam, Eight “Bible Studies”, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, pp. 1-78; V. Devasahayam, *Outside the Camp, Bible Studies in Dalit Perspective*, Chennai: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Centre, 1998

Biblical exegesis,¹⁵⁶ Devasahayam affirms the contextual relevance of Dalit experience and discourse which recognises the “legitimacy of Dalit bias and prejudice and the transformative role of Dalit Hermeneutics.”¹⁵⁷ Here we see Dalit theological recognition of the integral tension between Bible and context.

For M.M. Thomas the very nature of sin and the reality of human creativity meant that justice must be understood contextually as a dynamic between ‘love, power and law’. The potential for greater advancement through human creativity brought with it a greater potential for destructivity, intensifying the tension between development and justice.¹⁵⁸ Yet for Thomas, the community of forgiving love and the community of law cannot be considered ‘watertight compartments’: “while power-law necessities of justice cannot be overlooked in the name of redemptive love, the infinite possibility of justice moving in the direction of love should be explored.”¹⁵⁹ With human creativity increasing the power of humanity he believed the concept of law and justice required ‘constant revision’, and that “the relation between power, law and love is an ever changing dynamic relation.”¹⁶⁰ Thus there is always a tension between the ‘Eucharistic community’ and the ‘secular realm’:

It is a matter of central concern to lay Christians as they move between participation in the Eucharistic community of Divine and mutual forgiveness in Christ on Sundays and involvement in professional and social realms in the week days. They maintain in their own lives the tension between Grace and Law and they mediate that tension to the secular realm of their vocation making for their transformation. This is their prophetic ministry inherent in the Christians’ lay vocation.¹⁶¹

Essentially, the tools for discernment within the secular realm include both biblical reflection and social analysis of context. As spiritual beings, Thomas considers individuals and nations to be driven by a spiritual choice between God and idol, that is, in accordance with God or in accordance with self-righteousness: “in all

¹⁵⁶ V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 4

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xiv

¹⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Involvement”, in, S. Emmanuel David, ed. *The Bible in Today’s Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore College, 1994, p. 45

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 57

human actions in the world, we are led either by the Spirit of God or by idolatrous spirits opposed to God...Idolatry is always coupled with self-aggrandisement and God with justice and love.”¹⁶² One is a dehumanising force, and the other a humanising force, and it is these forces which the Christian must discern as present in each situation through the process of biblical reflection and social analysis: “What form of spiritual resistance should be taken in different situations can be decided only by two or three gathered in the name of Christ, Church and Kingdom within each situation.”¹⁶³

M.M. Thomas’s theology recognises that a Christian theological discourse on justice must be framed within a paradigm of creation-fall-redemption and the New Humanity in Christ, while at the same time acknowledging the need for context specific discernment. While he recognises and supports the contemporary conception of justice involving human equality and universal human rights, he affirms that diverse contextual situations influence context specific justice demands: “The demand is differently formulated in different concrete situations in terms of immediate sectional ends of justice which vary.”¹⁶⁴ Although Thomas does not refer specifically to the Dalit reality within a caste context, his theological assertion of the relation of Bible and context is considered a significant theological signpost for emerging Dalit theology.

3.2.6. Theological reflections on justice in the public square

M.M. Thomas sought to bring the concept of humanisation and justice into the heart of Christian theological discourse. Significantly, he believed Christian theological insight to have an essential contribution for Nation-building public square discourse. Indeed he called not only for theological reflection but also responsible action towards the transformation of society. It was in the realm of

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 58

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 67

¹⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 37. Thomas regards context specificity not only as related to present day religion, society and culture, but also as a historical reality. Thus each generation has different aspirations, becoming aware of God in different time specific contexts. See M.M. Thomas, “Patterns of Man’s Search for Salvation”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No. 2, June, 1964, p. 8

secular discourse that M.M. Thomas considered the Gospel of Jesus Christ to be challengingly relevant in providing a spiritual foundation for post-independent Indian society. Thomas therefore rejected the notion of a non-political Christianity deep rooted in the Indian Churches.¹⁶⁵ He argues:

The Church must accept not only the inevitability but also the desirability of the social revolution taking place in traditional social institutions, and welcome the new society that is emerging... The Church's service to society lies not in encouraging people to look backward with nostalgia for the traditional society, and its *dharma* or to see social change as a movement to bring in the Kingdom of God on earth, but in helping them to look forward and at the same time develop their capacity to discriminate between the creative and destructive, between the good and evil which are present and active in the new society. Personally, I think the greatest service to which the Church can render to the Indian society is to promote participation to the people in movements reshaping society and to clarify the crucial moral choices inherent in such participation.¹⁶⁶

Although a Christian, Thomas considered the struggle for justice to be waged with secular strategies in the secular realm, for it was here that the transformation of society and the search for justice for the poor and oppressed would essentially take place in India.¹⁶⁷ With the breakdown of traditional society, politics became the primary agent for social change and service, prompting Thomas to call upon the Church to become actively involved in the political realm.¹⁶⁸ This was not a call for communal Christian party politics, for he rejected the notion that the Gospel of Jesus Christ could be identified with any one culture, political order, or social ideology.¹⁶⁹ Indeed he saw it as a tragedy that many Churches in Asia had become pre-occupied with safeguarding their own communal interests, failing to recognise Christ present

¹⁶⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Church as the Servant of Society", Journal, *The Church and Society*, Madras: CLS, 1962, p. 3

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, *Faith and Ideology in the Struggle for Justice*, Bombay: BUILD, 1984, p. 2

¹⁶⁸ M.M. Thomas, "The Church as the Servant of Society", Journal, *The Church and Society*, Madras: CLS, 1962, p. 3

¹⁶⁹ M.M. Thomas, "The Challenge to the New Nations in Africa and Asia", Presentation to the World Council of Churches Assembly, New Delhi, 28th November, 1961

in the revolutions of contemporary time.¹⁷⁰ Christians, he argued, must become actively involved in the lives of the people, in partnership with non-Christians in the political and social sphere, in order to promote common social justice.¹⁷¹

In order for the people to participate in the secular structures of transformation, whether at national level or local *panchayat* level, Thomas urged for sufficient training of the laity in terms of technical skills, and the establishment of resource agencies to equip the people for responsible participation in the secular sphere.¹⁷² Thomas encouraged the Church congregation to be involved in the local community, essentially concerned with the social context in which the people live, in order that the community may 'fight some social evil in the neighbourhood.'¹⁷³ Significantly, the Dalit Task Force acknowledged in 2006 that the local congregation was to be the locus for Dalit liberation, with congregations working towards the well being of Christian and non-Christian Dalits to overcome their plight. Through the hard work of congregations, local justice issues have been raised and strategies implemented towards the attainment of liberating goals.¹⁷⁴ Clearly these goals are born from the grass roots experience of oppression related to a particular context, providing essential and unique voices for theological praxis and reflection on issues of justice and humanisation. The Dalit quest is not utopian in its vision, but sets attainable goals, celebrating liberation whenever it is experienced. It is argued that this localised work from the congregations, working in unity with one another to overcome the plight of the people in specific contexts, resonates strongly with Thomas's theological vision. Indeed the theological fragments he offered

¹⁷⁰ Thomas adds: "A programme of political action cannot be derived from the Gospel nor is there a universal Christian political line. This is one reason why a Christian political party is a dangerous affair. The other reason is that it easily slips into a body concerned with the narrow communal interests of the Christian community, rather than justice for all men and all groups in the nation. So in the usual course, it is through the secular political parties that Christians should exercise their political responsibilities – By secular politics I mean parties which are open to the adherents of all religions, and of no religion and are means for them all to cooperate together for the sake of the common good." *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² M.M. Thomas, "The Church as the Servant of Society", Journal, *The Church and Society*, Madras: CLS, 1962, p. 4

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ NCCI Dalit Task Force Report, "The Local Dalit Congregation as the Locus for Liberation", 21-23 June, Gurukul, Chennai, <http://www.nccidalittaskforce.com/dalit-task-force/reports/workshop.html>

provided a broad framework for continued theological discourse and action in the realm of political and social justice. As Dalit theology emerged, this broad framework of theological insight prompted the call for context specific deliberation and action.

4. Conclusion

This chapter began with a critical examination of Bishop Devasahayam's 'two-theologies' methodology, arguing that this methodology was inadequate for locating M.M. Thomas's theology. Moving beyond this dichotomy allowed us to observe the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas which avoided placing him untenably within the rigid category of traditional Indian theology or Dalit Christian theology.

Examining Thomas's reflections on the concept of humanisation, it was argued that Thomas sought 1) to relate theology and anthropology, interpreting human spirituality and salvation as integrally related to the material and social realm; 2) theologically posited an understanding of the human person as a transcendent spiritual being within the realm of nature, created free from conformity to religious, cultural or social dogma; 3) recognised the theological importance of dignity as an essential component of authentic humanness.

Examining Thomas's concern for justice, it was argued that although he offered no grand theory of justice, it remained a central component of his theological reflection. It was argued that Thomas offered the following significant theological fragments to the discourse on justice relevant to the emergence of Dalit theology: 1) Thomas understood justice to be integrally related to the theological concept of divine-human and human-human relationship; 2) Thomas sought to maintain the integral relation between individual and corporate morality and responsibility, emphasising concern for social transformation and justice; 3) Thomas's theological paradigm of creation-fall-redemption and the Christological paradigm of New Humanity in Christ supports the concept of liberating justice for the oppressed as a creative human vocation; 4) Thomas was optimistic about the possibility of liberating social transformation through the power of the Cross and Resurrection of

Christ; 5) Thomas recognised the need for contextual discernment and biblical hermeneutic reflection in the ongoing quest for justice; 6) Thomas sought to bring theological reflections on justice into the realm of public discourse.

I end the chapter as it began, with a quote from Bishop Devasahayam. In this chapter I have endeavoured to demonstrate key points of theological resonance between the theology of M.M. Thomas and Devasahayam. Affirming Thomas's theological understanding of the human being created in freedom, dignity and for loving community, Devasahayam writes: "In a situation where people are robbed of their freedom, dignity and community living, their humanity and God's image are denied and destroyed. It is an assault on the designs of the creator and hence a spiritual problem."¹⁷⁵ M.M. Thomas's quest to understand the ultimate meaning of human existence may be understood, notes Devasahayam, as:

[a] search to realize the new idea of community based on freedom, equality and fraternity. It implies, on the basis of the vision of the ideal community, a struggle to break the oppressive structures of caste, class and patriarchy, which sabotage the attempts of establishing the community. In this sense it is a quest for salvation.¹⁷⁶

It is clear that Bishop Devasahayam does indeed consider M.M. Thomas a co-theological pilgrim, offering important theological insights relevant for emerging Dalit theology.

¹⁷⁵ V. Devasahayam, "Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost: M.M. Thomas's Understanding of Humans, God and the New Humanity", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society: A Tribute to M.M. Thomas*, p. 115

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116

Chapter V: New Humanity in Christ

1. Introduction

Dalit theologians seeks to maintain an essential link between Christian and non-Christian Dalits in the quest for Dalit liberation. In chapter I of this thesis it was argued that Dalit theology could be located in the tension between the search for a Dalit meta-theological narrative and Dalit micro-theological narratives, attempting to formulate a Christological paradigm inclusive and relevant for the holistic liberation of Christian and non-Christian Dalits. The Dalit theological quest has thus been to maintain the centrality of Christ within the context of religious and cultural plurality, posing essential ecclesiastical and theological questions concerning the relationship of Church and world, and Church and the oppressed. It is precisely in the midst of this quest that M.M. Thomas's theological articulation of *koinonia*-in-Christ is considered relevant to emerging Dalit theology. In the first section of this chapter I shall briefly outline M.M. Thomas's interpretation of 'koinonia-in Christ', identifying significant points at which Thomas's theology resonates in the theology of Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam.

In the second section I examine significant points of theological departure between Thomas, Azariah and Devasahayam. In particular, Thomas's classical understanding of universal sin and forgiveness comes under critical scrutiny. Two Dalit theological concepts will be introduced: 1) God's 'direct option' for the Dalits; 2) the concept of Dalits as 'sinned-against'.

2. Global ecumenical discourse and Indian theology

The openness of the Church based on its mission to the world, means today openness to the contemporary world to participate in the exodus of the oppressed to new life, and within that setting to witness to the New Humanity in Christ as the power to redeem cultures, ideologies and religions from the demonic forces inherent in them, and make them truly human. When we speak of 'the open Church', it is this openness we are talking about – an openness arising out of our commitment to Christ and His Mission in the contemporary world.¹

M.M. Thomas's theology was essentially influenced and shaped by twentieth century global ecumenical discourse, and in relation to dynamic shifts taking place in the religio-secular context of India. Three distinctive factors in particular served to shape the development of Thomas's theology: 1) the revolutionary self-awakening of the poor and the oppressed for their social liberation;² 2) theological renewal emerging from the rediscovery of the Kingdom of God;³ 3) the renaissance of indigenous cultures and non-Christian religion.⁴ Thomas sought to theologise in the midst of these dynamic realities in order that the Gospel of Jesus Christ may become 'challengingly relevant' to the Indian people's quest for a transformed society. In light of these dynamic shifts, Thomas posed a central theological question: "What is the relation between the Gospel of salvation and the struggles of men everywhere for their humanity?"⁵ Responding to this question, Thomas articulates the paradigm of 'koinonia-in Christ' as essentially relevant to global and Indian theological discourse. Prior to examining this paradigm further, however, it is important to outline briefly the theological shifts which influenced and shaped Thomas's thought.

¹ M.M. Thomas, "The Open Church", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, p. 419

² *Ibid.*, pp. 418-9

³ M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel", David Lyon & Albert Manuel, eds. *Renewal for Mission*, Madras: CLS, 1968, p. 103

⁴ M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 418-9

⁵ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theology of Mission in Contemporary India*, Madras: CLS, 1971, p. 2

2.1. The Awakening of the Oppressed

*[t]he revolutionary ferment of the world is created by the awakening of the hitherto submerged or suppressed groups who express their aspiration for liberation from enslaving structures of life by demanding the right to participate in the total life of society at the centres where power is exercised and decisions made.*⁶

The most relevant quest in the modern world, M.M. Thomas argued, was the struggle of men and women for their humanity.⁷ Certainly this quest had become deeply challenging within global ecumenical discourse. Thomas quotes from the Uppsala WCC Report on 'Renewal for Mission', 1968: "We belong to a humanity that cries passionately and articulately for a full human life. Yet the very humanity of man and his societies is threatened by a greater variety of destructive forces than ever. And the acutest moral problems all hinge upon the question: What is man?"⁸ The Report added that the question of humanity had a 'burning relevance' for Christian mission, because Christianity offered the gift of a "new creation which is a radical renewal of the old and the invitation of men to grow up in their full humanity in the New Man, Jesus Christ."⁹ Thomas asserts that this quest makes the Christian mission essentially relevant to India:

In the olden days India was thought of as a 'people in search of God'. Therefore you had to see your missionary task in relation to the struggle of the people for realising God. Today the most important struggle is the struggle of all people to realise their humanity, their human dignity. Our presentation of Christ must therefore be integrally related to the struggle which is going on today.¹⁰

In the Moderator's Opening address to the Nairobi WCC Assembly 1975, M.M. Thomas commented that the integration of the Faith and Order, Life and Work, and the International Missionary Council (1961), prompted a dynamic

⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Madras: CLS, 1975, pp. 10-11. Thomas includes the 'outcaste' Indians in this awakening movement, those "rousing themselves from slumber by historical forces and by a new idea of justice." (p. 12)

⁷ M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel", p. 98

⁸ Quoted in, M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 3

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel", p. 98

interaction at ‘theological and spiritual depth’ between the concepts of unity, mission, and social service.¹¹ Each had to ‘define itself’ with greater clarity in the context of the other two, prompting ‘fresh theological exploration.’¹² Although tension existed between ecumenical and evangelical strands of the WCC, Thomas saw this coming together as an opportunity to develop a dynamic ‘contemporary ecumenism’:

The Council has come to realize that the life and mission of the Church must be rethought in the context of, and in challenging relevance to, the human issues agitating mankind in our present historical situation. And, conversely, it has also realized that the contemporary world is prepared to listen to the Church’s interpretation of the human issues of our time only if this interpretation is set within the context of the Church’s faith in and witness to the renewal of all things in Jesus Christ.¹³

With a growing recognition of the integral relationship between mission, unity and social witness,¹⁴ the question of social justice came to the fore of theological debate. The International Congress on World Evangelization held in Lausanne (1974), positively acknowledged the relation between evangelism and social responsibility, affirming that Christians must share in the concern of God for “justice and reconciliation throughout human society and for liberation of man from every kind of oppression.”¹⁵ The Faith and Order meeting in Louvain (1971), attempted to relate Church unity to the struggle for human community across racial,

¹¹ M.M. Thomas, “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites”, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, Madras: CLS, 1978, p. 291

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 291-292

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 292

¹⁴ This was the subject of M.M. Thomas’s work, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1981

¹⁵ Quoted from the Lausanne Covenant in, M.M. Thomas, “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites”, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p. 300. Later in his Nairobi Moderator’s Address, Thomas acknowledges the primary evangelistic focus of Lausanne and its concern to distinguish between social action and evangelism, but adds: “The question is often raised as to whether in this emphasis on social and political justice there is not present a social utopianism which denies the fact of sin and affirms a self-redemptive humanism. Yes, the danger is always present. So is the opposite danger that we may not take seriously enough the fact of divine grace and the power of righteousness it releases to a daring faith in the realm of social and political action.” pp. 300-301. Jacob Thomas notes that the evangelicals at Lausanne had been challenged to acknowledge the “glaring contrast between the affluence of the West and the poverty of the Two-Thirds World”, forcing them to “come to terms with the total needs of humanity”. Jacob Thomas, *From Lausanne to Manila: Evangelical Social Thought: Models of Missions and the Social Relevance of the Gospel*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2003, pp. 44-65.

class and cultural barriers, and to understand the relation between Eucharistic fellowship and the principle of social justice.¹⁶ It asserted that the Christ of the Eucharist is the Christ of the poor, and that the “struggle for social justice belongs to the *esse* of the Church, along with evangelistic mission.”¹⁷

Significantly for Thomas these concerns, emanating from both ecumenical and evangelical contexts, were essential for the Indian context:

Most of the Indian Church consists of the poor; and naturally one would expect the Churches to be agents of social transformation for justice. But all the organised Churches are notoriously supporters of the status quo. Why? Because the middle class people in the Church institutions and urban congregations are in the leadership of the Churches, and they exploit the minority communal consciousness among Christians to buttress their vested interests.¹⁸

The challenge of the poor and oppressed raised urgent theological questions, prompting Thomas to urge the Church in India to “live and restate the truth and meaning of Christ in dialogical existence with the world of liberating movements and of indigenous cultures, secular ideologies and religions which confront them in different parts of the world.”¹⁹ In other words, how was the Church in India to respond to the cries of the oppressed, and to liberation movements emerging within both religious and secular indigenous contexts? Here Thomas’s question concerning the relation between ‘salvation’ in Christ and the search of the people everywhere for humanisation becomes directly relevant, essentially shaping his theological quest for a Christ-centred *koinonia*.

2.1.1. Scheduled Caste influence

M.M. Thomas’s theology demonstrates a fundamental concern for the poor and the oppressed, a concern which essentially shaped his reflections upon Christ-centred secularism. Yet it is important to note that Thomas’s articulation of

¹⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p. 7

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16

¹⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The Open Church”, *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, pp. 418-419

koinonia-in-Christ was in part influenced by the *Schedule Caste response* to earlier Christian mission. Thomas acknowledges that the missionary enterprise was largely undertaken by evangelicals, but that the encounter with Scheduled Castes prompted missionaries to become ‘bearers of cultural and social humanisation’.²⁰ He writes: “The Salvation in Christ became the source of a new human fellowship at least at religious worship and the sacrament of Holy Communion; and it struck a blow to the spiritual rigidities of an unequal caste structure.”²¹ Despite significant obstacles faced by Christianity during the missionary era, including the realisation that the Church was becoming an isolated communal entity, Thomas notes:

[t]he outcastes, the poor and the orphans saw Christian faith as the source of a new humanising influence and the foundation of a human community. Where conversion was genuine, whether of individuals or of groups, the converts saw Salvation in Christ not only in terms of individual salvation or heaven after death, but also as a spiritual source of a new community on earth in which their human dignity and status were recognised.²²

This point is significant, indicating that Thomas’s theology was shaped by the response of the early Dalit converts to the evangelical message of salvation. These converts saw in Christ a ‘new humanising influence’ and the ‘foundation for a human community’. Salvation was understood as essentially related not only to the individual, but as a ‘spiritual source of a new community on earth’, valuing human equality and dignity. The influence of the Dalits themselves in Thomas’s thoughts cannot be underestimated. It is little surprise that Thomas’s theological reflections upon Christ-centred fellowship would become relevant to later Dalit theology, for *Dalits* themselves influenced Thomas’s theology.

2.2. Church-Kingdom debate

The affirmation Jesus is Messiah means that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the centre of the historical movement of the fulfilment of the divine purpose of the whole world; and that the history of the people acknowledging it and awaiting the promise inherent in it, signifies the power and the presence in the world of

²⁰ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 12

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 14

*the divine goal, namely the transformation of the Kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of God in Christ. The relation between the particularisation of the Church the People of the Messiah and the Universalism of the End is radically raised at this point.*²³

Integrally connected to the concerns of the poor and oppressed, global ecumenical debate in the twentieth century witnessed a shift in theological focus from 'Church' to 'World', acknowledging the 'Lordship' of Christ over the created order.²⁴ M.M. Thomas writes of this shift:

Dr. Stanley Jones challenged the Tambaram International Missionary Conference's pre-occupation with the Church to the exclusion of the Kingdom. And in 1960 at the World Student [Christian] Federation Teaching Conference in Strasburg, a similar challenge came to the ecumenical movement from the side of younger theologians and student leaders, under the leadership of Dr. Hoedendijk. According to them the 'world renewed in Christ' was more integral to the Gospel of the Church and its justification only as it was oriented what God was doing in the world. God-World-Church is the order, not God-Church-World.²⁵

Once again Thomas related global ecumenical discourse specifically to changes taking place in India. His personal conviction was that, "God so loved the *world* so much that He gave His only begotten Son to be its salvation, (John 3:16), that God

²³ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 135

²⁴ For a history of Ecumenical discussions on Mission in the twentieth century see, T.V. Philip, *Edinburgh to Salvador: Twentieth Century Ecumenical Missiology*, Delhi: ISPCK & Tiruvalla: CSS, 1999. See also, David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis Books, 1997, ch. 12

²⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Mission of the Church and Human Community". Bishop Sadiq Memorial Lectures, March, 1983. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore. Stanley Jones wrote in a 1939 article for *The Christian Century*, entitled "Where Madras Missed Its Way": "Madras [Tambaram] looked out and saw the Kingdom and the Church at the door, opened the door to the lesser and more obvious, the Church, and left the Kingdom at the door. So Madras missed the way." Quoted in T.V. Philip, *The Encounter Between Theology and Ideology; An Exploration into the Communicative Theology of M.M. Thomas*, Madras: CLS, 1986, p. 40. J.C. Hoekendijk wrote in preparation for the Willingen Conference of 1948: "It may well be that we are so wrapped up in our Church-centrism that we hardly realise any longer how much our ideas are open to controversy. Would it not be a good thing to start all over again in trying to understand what it really means when we repeat, again and again, our favourite missionary text, 'the Gospel of the Kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the *Oikoumene* – and our attempts to re-think our ecclesiology within this frame work of the kingdom-gospel-Apostolate-world?" J.C. Hoekendijk, "The Church in the Missionary Thinking", *International Review of Missions*, Vol. XLI, July, 1952, pp. 332-333

was in Christ, reconciling the *world* unto himself (2. Cor. 5:19).”²⁶ Thus, he considered the redemptive and reconciliatory act of Jesus Christ fulfilled the work and purpose of God for the whole world.²⁷ This shift was particularly significant for the Church in India, which, notes Thomas, had become “isolated from the larger community into Mission compounds and denominations, and begun to rust and inbreed, turning into an exclusive Christian caste or closed communal groups instead of being an open, outgoing fellowship in the larger society.”²⁸ Thomas laments with Dr. Ambedkar that scheduled caste converts to Christianity had become “‘selfish and self-centred’, indifferent to their former caste associates and interested only in getting ahead.”²⁹ Thomas rejected this sense of Christian communalism as contra to the fundamental mission of the Church:

A Church of Jesus Christ cannot...be open to God in Christ without being open at the same time to the world where God is at work through His Spirit seeking to sum up ‘all things’ in Christ (Eph. 1:10) A Church which is closed to the world which God has loved and redeemed, also closes itself against God’s Spirit. Openness is the very fundamental characteristic of the Church of Christ, and its Form should be such as makes this double openness in Christ to God and the world an abiding reality.³⁰

M.M. Thomas urged that two theological issues be addressed within the Church in India: 1) a challenge to ‘pietistic individualism’ which regarded salvation only in terms of individual piety and inner spiritual experience without a concern for human relations; 2) overcoming a theological position which couldn’t comprehend the concept of Christ-centred secular fellowship outside the Church.³¹ Thomas was concerned that the communal Christian community had become isolated from other religious communities, making it merely ‘one self-regarding religious community’

²⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Jesus Christ Frees and Unites”, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p. 290

²⁷ M.M. Thomas, “The Open Church”, *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, p. 415

²⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 13

²⁹ Waskom J. Pickett, *Christ’s Way to India’s Heart*, London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1938. See M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 13

³⁰ M.M. Thomas, “The Open Church”, *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. XCV, No. 9, September, 1975, p. 415

³¹ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 13

among others.³² Thus Thomas sought a more dynamic theological paradigm which could bridge communal divide in order to witness to Christ as an open community:

We have to find a more proper form of the Church in India than the very unsatisfactory form of an Indian religious community. The goal should be its capacity to witness to Christ as Saviour, Servant and Perfector of all men not merely as isolated individuals, but as persons in and with their various secular and religious group-ties and longing for fuller life and expressing it in categories of thought and life characteristic of the different groupings. We need a new pattern of combining Christian self-identity and secular solidarity with all men.³³

Thomas posited the theological concept of Christ-centred *Koinonia*, arguing that the Church's task of creating fellowship in the larger community prompted a move towards fellowship which avoided turning itself into a 'self-centred, closed communal group'.³⁴

M.M. Thomas's position was critically challenged by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin, who questioned Thomas's exegesis of the term *koinonia*. Thomas had written: "New Testament scholars have pointed out that *koinonia* in the New Testament does not refer primarily to the Church or the quality of life within the Church, but that it is the manifestation of the new reality of the Kingdom at work in the world of men in world history."³⁵ Of the eighteen references to *koinonia* in the Bible, however, Newbigin argued that at least sixteen references are "unambiguously concerned with the life of the Church", and that II Corinthians 6:14 "emphatically denies that there can be *koinonia* at all between believers and others."³⁶ Towards the end of his life, Thomas defended his position, quoting from the WCC publication, *Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation – Costly Unity* (1993): "Koinonia is not primarily about the Church. It is the gift of God's own life

³² *Ibid.*, p. 60

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 19

³⁶ II Corinthians 6:14: "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there in righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness." (NRSV) Letter to M.M. Thomas, 17 November, 1971. M.M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues*, Madras: CLS, 1977, pp. 117-118

that God offers to the whole community.”³⁷ The common finding of the publication, Thomas adds, is that:

[i]t is possible in the light of Jesus Christ to look at forms of caring *koinonia* outside the Church as movements of the Holy Spirit gathering people to serve God in ways that they may not fully understand. In humility the church may seek to point to what the Spirit is doing outside its visible boundaries, as well as within, thus witnessing to the wider work in creation.³⁸

It is important to note, however, that Thomas was not *anti-Church*. Indeed, he considered Church as integral to Christian mission as a body of believers who know themselves to be forgiven sinners.³⁹ He writes: “The whole world does not see the whole truth about itself. But a part of it does. The Church is part of the world which knows the nature and historical destiny of the whole world. The Church lives acknowledging Christ’s redemption and His rule over the secular world and human history, and lives to proclaim it among men, both as word and deed.”⁴⁰ Thomas opposes those who seek a ‘Churchless Christianity’, although he recognises the need to take this concern seriously, for he considers any protest against status-quo Church structures to have ‘provisional justification’.⁴¹ Ultimately, however, Thomas asks how the Church can move beyond its communal identity in order to witness to Christ as bearer of true human life and salvation to all religious and secular communities.⁴² Thomas agrees with Paul Lehman that although the distinction between Church and world is fundamental, the boundary between them is not easily defined:⁴³ “The

³⁷ Mary Tanner, quoted in Paul A. Crow, “Ecclesiology: The Intersection Between the search for Ecclesial Unity and the Struggle for Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation”, Thomas. F. Best & Wesley Granberg, eds. *Koinonia and Justice, Peace and Creation: Costly Unity*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993, p. 57. M.M. Thomas, “Towards and Ecclesiology in Context”, *A Diaconial Approach to Indian Ecclesiology*, Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies & Tiruvalla: CSS, 1995, p. 13

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 14

³⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Primal Vision and Modernization”, *The Church’s Mission and Post-Modern Humanism*, Tiruvalla: CSS & Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 48

⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, “The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formulation of a True Secular Humanism”, *Student World*, Geneva: WSF, 1953, p. 139

⁴¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Mission of the Church and Human Community”, March, 1983. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁴² See, M.M. Thomas, “The Post-Colonial Crisis in Mission”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVIII, no. 1, March, 1971, pp. 64-70.

⁴³ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 136. Lehman argued: “The difference between believers and unbelievers is not defined by Church membership or even in the last analysis by

Gospel is the world renewed in Christ. Therefore the boundary between Church and the world is becoming a little too difficult to draw. Both human community and the Christian community have the same centre in Christ.”⁴⁴

While M.M. Thomas is highly critical of the Church as an institution organised on caste and class lines, he is an advocate of the Church, in particular the sacramental reality of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, which, he believed, shook the foundation of caste for the first time in India.⁴⁵ Yet he urged that this sacramental reality not be regarded as separate from the social reality beyond the Church. While the original friction of different caste groups coming together for the Lord’s Supper had eased, offering hope for a new fellowship beyond the Church, Table fellowship still remained distinct from social fellowship. When Dalit Christians in Kerala sought to relate to upper caste groups regarding issues of economic justice and land tenure, Christian *koinonia* effectively broke down.⁴⁶ Thus M.M. Thomas’s search for a theology of true secular fellowship in Christ sought to break the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular realm, for he understood both to be located under the Lordship of Christ.

2.3. Theology in the midst of religio-secular diversity

M.M. Thomas was aware of the break-up of the traditional integration between religion, society and state.⁴⁷ Thomas viewed this break-up as essential to the vision of a transformed Indian society. Modernity had broken traditional institutions of Indian society bound and sanctioned by Hinduism,⁴⁸ so much so that ‘religion’ and

baptism. The difference is defined by imaginative and behavioural sensitivity to what God is doing in the world to make and to keep life human, to achieve the maturity of men, that is, the new humanity.”

See Paul Lehman, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, London: Harper & Row, 1976, p. 117

⁴⁴ M.M. Thomas, “The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel”, David Lyon & Albert Manuel, eds. *Renewal for Mission*, p. 103

⁴⁵ M.M. Thomas, “Fellowship in Christ: The Gospel for Contemporary India”, Manuscript, United Theological College Archives, August 3, 1972, pp. 3-4

⁴⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The Mission of the Church and Human Community”, March, 1983. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁴⁷ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 3

⁴⁸ M.M. Thomas, “Secularism of Society”, *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 9, 1959, p. 333

‘culture’ could no longer be considered ‘almost identical’.⁴⁹ Thomas termed this breakdown the ‘secularisation of society’,⁵⁰ offering great potentiality for an open secular fellowship in Christ.⁵¹ The process of nation-building raised important strategic questions concerning how political, economic and social institutions could be developed in order to achieve the goals of economic development, social justice, and recognition of fundamental human rights.⁵² It also raised essential questions concerning cultural and spiritual foundations which could ‘buttress the new pattern of social humanism’, prompting the emergence of diverse secular and renascent religious ideologies.⁵³ Thomas believed Christianity had an invaluable role to play in India’s nation-building quest, entering into dialogue with emerging secular and renascent religious movements in order to witness to an open, secular humanism grounded in Christ.

M.M. Thomas was deeply influenced by the probing questions of Dietrich Bonhoeffer regarding the relevance of Christ for a secular world ‘come of age’,⁵⁴ and in particular his reference to a ‘religionless Christianity’. Although Thomas confesses that he ‘cannot imagine’ what such a concept looks like in reality, it struck a chord in Thomas and helped shape his theological enquiry.⁵⁵ How such a concept may be developed, he observed, would depend on how effectively the Church grappled with the “morally ambitious realities of the modern lay world, through its own lay members, who themselves know these realities and the struggle of faith within them.”⁵⁶ Here Thomas reinforces his advocacy of the role of the laity, those

⁴⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The Church as the Servant of Society”, *The Church and Society*, Church of South India 8th Synod Edition, 1962, p. 4

⁵⁰ M.M. Thomas, “Secularism of Society”, *National Christian Council Review*, p. 333

⁵¹ In order to be consistent to Thomas’s thought, it is important to note that such potentiality included the potential for greater “perils for human community”. See “The Revolutions of our Time: New Potentialities and Perils for Human Community.” *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, ch. 1

⁵² M.M. Thomas, “Patterns of Modern Man’s Search for Salvation”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XI, No.2, June, 1964, p. 11

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake*, Geneva: WCC Publications, 1987, pp. 70-77. See, Bonhoeffer’s letters from Prison, dated 30th April & 16th July, 1944 in, Eberhard Bethge, ed. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers From Prison*, Simon & Schuster: Touchstone, 1997, pp. 278-282 & 357-361 respectively.

⁵⁵ M.M. Thomas, “Secularisation of Society”, *National Christian Council Review*, p. 336. See also, M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake*, pp. 70-73

⁵⁶ M.M. Thomas, “Secularisation of Society”, *National Christian Council Review*, p. 336

who live and work amidst the struggles of everyday life beyond the Church, in shaping new paths towards Christian fellowship within the wider community.

Thomas was also influenced by Paul Devanandan, who suggested that the ferment of modern Indian society in renascent religions and secular ideologies reflected the ferment of Christ.⁵⁷ In response to Raymond Panikkar's *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, M.M. Thomas wrote *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, emphasising the influence of Christ in renascent Hindu thought.⁵⁸ Thomas quotes S. Natarajan, who suggested that the 'fear of Christianity' as a result of Christian mission may be understood as the "beginning of much social wisdom in India."⁵⁹ Agreeing with Natarajan, although stressing also the influence of the 'love' of Christ, Thomas notes: "Christianity has contributed in no small measure to the cultural and spiritual ferment of contemporary Asia."⁶⁰

The move towards Independence had also witnessed the emergence of many secular ideologies in the Indian context.⁶¹ Indeed Thomas made his own enquiry into the history of the Indian National Movement, including the emergence and development of Liberal Nationalism, Socialism and Communism.⁶² In light of the popular notion of secularism as a revolt against traditional religion, Thomas suggests that this did not necessarily mean a revolt against God.⁶³ Even where there is an apparent negation of Christianity, he argued, it is possible to meet Christ in 'some form:'

⁵⁷ Paul Devanandan, *I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes Unto the Hills*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1963; M.M. Thomas, "Christology and Pluralistic Consciousness", Manuscript of a paper presented at the Symposium "Currents in Contemporary Christology", American Academy of Religion, 1985, in the UTC Archives, Bangalore. For an in depth analysis by M.M. Thomas on the thought of Paul Devanandan, see M.M. Thomas, "Christ and Religions: A Study of the thought of Raymond Panikkar and Paul Devanandan against the Background of a survey of Major Ecumenical Trends on the Theology of Religious Pluralism", Unpublished Manuscript, UTC, Bangalore, 1985, pp. 150-192; M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*, pp. 85-104

⁵⁸ M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, London: SCM Press, 1969

⁵⁹ S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India*, London: Asia Publishing House, 1959, p. 8. While acknowledging the impact of British rule and English education as channels for modern ideas entering India, Natarajan notes that Christian missions played a significant part in introducing India to the 'humanistic side of Western civilisation.' pp. 5-7

⁶⁰ M.M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution*, London: SCM Press, 1966, p. 89.

⁶¹ See, Aleyamma Zachariah, *Modern Religious and Secular Movements in India*, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2003

⁶² M.M. Thomas, "5 Main Ideologies", Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore, 1952

⁶³ M.M. Thomas, "Secularisation of Society", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. LXXIX, No. 9, September, 1959, pp. 333-4

Even in the centre of Marxism, you cannot avoid talking about Christ. Though the Hindu and secular movements are much more dominant in shaping the spiritual and cultural foundations of the new life of India, we cannot get away from the fact that at the soul, at the core of this spiritual awakening, there is a Christian impetus.⁶⁴

The influence of global ecumenical discourse on Thomas's thought is apparent. Quoting from a WCC Report entitled, 'Commission on Christian Hope', Thomas notes that emerging secular ideologies, "in some way bear witness to the great disturbance which God's revelation in Christ has made in the world...it is in part at least the ferment set up by its preaching and life which has brought these ferments in the world."⁶⁵ He adds:

The human aspirations which are basic to these various ideologies have their origin in the Christian revelation. The passion for social justice which underlies the origin of Stalinism, and the search for rational truth which is basic scientific humanism, and the principles of human individuality and social equality which lie behind democratic utopianism – all these have their roots in the Christian understanding of man and the world.⁶⁶

Attempting to hold the centrality of Christ in the midst of emerging renascent and secular faiths, Thomas cautioned against three false Christian responses: 1) A pietistic approach which understood the Gospel of salvation of Christ in purely spiritual terms. This for Thomas was a 'lopsided' understanding of salvation used to justify a withdrawal from the realities of the revolutions taking place.⁶⁷ 2) Interpreting the revolution and secularisation as a revolt against God. Thomas rejected this approach, used to justify the call for a return to a state of integrated

⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, "The Struggle for Human Dignity as a Preparation for the Gospel", David Lyon & Albert Manuel, ed. *Renewal for Mission*, p. 101. For Thomas, Marx's understanding of religion as "the self-consciousness and self regard of man who has either not yet found or has lost himself", demands not an abandonment of religion as "illusory happiness" but rather "the demand to abandon a condition which requires illusion." This, Thomas suggests, poses new questions of human self-transcendence and destiny which drive humanity to seek liberation towards the true human state in Christ. See, M.M. Thomas, "Significance of Marxist and Barthian Insights for a Theology of Religion", *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXI, No.4, 1974.

⁶⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Christian Gospel of Redemption as the Formulation of a True Secular Humanism", *Student World*, Geneva: WSF, 2nd Quarter, 1953, p. 136

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, "Christ's Promise within the Revolution and the Christian Mission," *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p. 64

socio-political life based on traditional religious principles. Indeed, Thomas interpreted the modern revolutionary movements as the judgment of God against a false order which had historically suppressed human freedom creativity.⁶⁸ 3) A view which gave “Christian benediction to the revolution, considering it as a scheme of redemption.”⁶⁹ Such a notion implied the capacity of humanity to bring about self-fulfilment, thus denying the reality of sin and the need of salvation offered in Christ.⁷⁰ Rather than adhere to these three false approaches, M.M. Thomas urged that the Christian recognize that “the revolution of our time has within it the promise of Christ for a fuller and richer human life for men (sic) and societies.”⁷¹

For M.M. Thomas, the Church in India should not shy away from emerging renascent and secular movements of the day, but rather discern how Christ was present in the revolutions of contemporary Asia, releasing new creative forces.⁷² Thomas justified his position theologically, stressing three key points:

1) The Gospel of Jesus Christ cannot be identified with any one culture, political order, social ideology or moral system.⁷³ Rather, the Gospel *transcends* all cultures, and is the ‘divine power’ for judgment and redemption, “which gives the Church the ability to relate itself positively but critically to all the creative movements of renewal of man (sic) and his world without absolutising any of them.”⁷⁴ Thus M.M. Thomas is prepared to come into dialogue with renascent faith and secular ideologies in order to witness to the judging and liberating power of Christ through the Cross and Resurrection. This allows Thomas to be influenced by various ideologies, in particular Gandhism and Marxism, while at the same time being

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 64-65

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.* Thomas’s position brought with it the criticism of positing *revolution* as a substitute for *revelation*, a criticism most notably made by Dr. H.H. Wolf. Thomas rightly rejected Wolf’s criticism as a misunderstanding of his theological position. The written dialogue between Wolf and Thomas is found in, M.M. Thomas, “Christ at Work in History”, *Some Theological Dialogues*, pp. 42-72

⁷² M.M. Thomas, “The Asian Churches and the Study of Rapid Social Change”, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, January 1985, p. 24

⁷³ M.M. Thomas, “The Challenge to the Churches in the New Nations in Africa and Asia.” Speech delivered at the plenary session of the Third Assembly of the World Council of Churches, New Delhi, 1961. Manuscript, UTC Archives, Bangalore.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

critical of them in light of his understanding of salvation offered in Christ from human attempts at self-redemption.

2) Christ offers redemption to the whole world; Christ's judgment and redemption includes politics, society and culture, secular ideologies and religions.⁷⁵ The Christian hope guaranteed by the resurrection of Christ is that "'all things' will be summed up in Him in the end."⁷⁶ The eschatological consummation of all things into Christ is central to Thomas's understanding of humanisation and salvation. The belief that all movements ultimately fall under the Lordship of Christ allows Thomas to conclude that Christ is discernable as a spiritual source for the goals of justice, liberation and humanisation within the revolutionary movement.

3) Christ is present and active within the world, engaged in a continuous dialogue with humans and nations in order to affirm the power of His Law and His Love.⁷⁷ Thus the mission of the Church for M.M. Thomas "is not to save itself from the revolutions of our time, but to discern Christ in them and to witness to His Kingdom in them, waiting for the day of its final consummation."⁷⁸

Interpreting A.G. Hogg's reference to the incarnation of God as the 'Transcendent Satyagraha' of God, Thomas argued that, "wherever Love identifies itself with the struggle of oppressed humanity for liberation towards a community of justice and love, and does not let the means betray the end, there is acknowledgment of the ultimacy of the Way of the Cross for the life of the world transcending all religious and ideological distinctions."⁷⁹ Thomas does not give up the centrality of Christ but rather affirms the centrality of Christ in the process of secularism in the Indian context. This theological perspective breaks down the divide between the sacred and the secular, in keeping with his theological understanding of the Gospel transcending all religions, cultures and ideologies, and justifies his call for a Christ-centred fellowship, or *koinonia*-in-Christ beyond the realm of the Church.

2.4. Christ-centred *Koinonia*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ M.M. Thomas, "Christology and Pluralistic Consciousness", p. 10

The theological paradigm of Christ-centred *koinonia* is located within the broad paradigm of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. More specifically it may be located in the paradigm of New Humanity in Christ within the context of post-Independent India. It is within this paradigm that Thomas interprets the awakening of the poor and the oppressed for liberation, the theological renewal emerging from the rediscovery of the Kingdom of God, and the challenge of renascent religious and secular ideologies.

The ‘newness of life’ offered in Christ had, significantly for Thomas, three dimensions. The first is the offer in Christ of a renewal of personal inner being: “Therefore, if anyone is joined to Christ, he is a *new being*; the old is gone, the new has come” (II Cor. 5)⁸⁰ Secondly, newness offered in Christ is the “good news of a new human fellowship, a new community, a new humanity...*renewal of human relations*.”⁸¹ Thirdly, Christ brings renewal of the whole of creation, that is, of “all things in heaven and on earth”.⁸² The end of world history, notes Thomas, is a human community which has become free from slavery and attained “the glorious freedom of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).⁸³ It means reconciliation with God and mutual brotherhood/sisterhood of humanity in Christ, who is the ‘first fruits’ of human liberation in the present world.⁸⁴

The New Humanity in Christ is understood by Thomas as a community without communal division. He affirms the Evanston Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1954), which declared: “Those who know that Christ is Risen should have the courage to expect new power to break through every human barrier.”⁸⁵ Referencing the thoughts of mentor and colleague Paul Devanandan, Thomas writes:

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁸² Here M.M. Thomas was influenced by Paul Devanandan, who wrote: “The ultimate end is a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation. How utterly impossible can it be for any fragment of mankind to be changed, or for all humanity to be transformed, unless the grossly material and the purely animal content of the world is also transformed.” *Ibid.*, p. 6

⁸³ M.M. Thomas, trans. T.M. Philip, *God the Liberator: Exodus*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 30

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31

⁸⁵ M.M. Thomas, “Rediscovery of the Church: Being and Mission”, Sermon, WCC Assembly, Evanston, 1954

‘All men now share in the new creation in Christ...A new humanity is now in the making, in which we are all being reconciled to God, one to another, and each to his own self’...If the new man in Jesus Christ “has broken down the dividing wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile, Devanandan asks, does it not mean also that the new humanity in Christ transcends the Christian and the non-Christian, and that the division between Christianity, other religions, and secularism breaks down wherever the vision of the new man Jesus Christ is transforming them?⁸⁶

Thus for Thomas, while it is necessary to speak of the “Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ acknowledged by faith in the Christian *Koinonia* as its structured nucleus”, so too must there be acknowledgment of a “larger unstructured stream of a *koinonia*-in Christ or a ‘Communion in the Messiah’, spiritually continuous with it”⁸⁷

3. The significance of M.M. Thomas’s thought for Dalit theology

It is argued that Thomas’s paradigm of New Humanity in Christ, and specifically his understanding of Christ-centred *koinonia*, had a significant influence upon the emergence of Dalit theology. Indeed, in his quest to establish a paradigm of Christ-centred open secularism, Thomas provided a theological paradigm relevant for the Dalit endeavour to hold in creative tension the search for a meta-theological narrative and micro-theological narratives. The very nature of Dalit Christian solidarity and identity with non-Christian Dalits make Thomas’s theology significantly relevant to Dalit theological discourse.

3.1. New Humanity in Christ: Bishop Devasahayam

Reflecting upon the theology of M.M. Thomas in a lecture entitled “The Church and the New Humanity in Christ”,⁸⁸ Bishop Devasahayam investigates

⁸⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel and the Quest of Modern Asia”, *Union Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, No. 3, March, 1967, p. 236

⁸⁷ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 137

⁸⁸ V. Devasahayam, “The Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society*, Bangalore: BTE-SSC, 1998, pp. 109-131

Thomas's theology of New Humanity in Christ and its implications for the Church in relation to the wider pluralistic society. In this lecture the influence of M.M. Thomas becomes apparent, allowing us to identify significant points of theological resonance with Devasahayam. The lecture begins with personal reflections:

I have often wondered what tangible or substantial difference is brought about in the world by the coming of Jesus Christ, a difference recognizable by one and all – the faithful and the unbeliever. I discovered that it was the objective reality of the Christian Church that is the differential between the time before Christ and after Christ, a proof of Christ's life and work.⁸⁹

Certainly Devasahayam is critical of many aspects of traditional Christian theology, as noted in Chapter IV, yet his affirmation of the Church is clear based upon his vocation as Church leader.

Bishop Devasahayam affirms Thomas's description of the Church as more than a sociological reality, as "the manifestation of the new reality of the Kingdom at work in the world."⁹⁰ Acknowledging the social reality of the Church, Devasahayam agrees with Thomas that the Church cannot be thought of purely in terms of membership of a religious community through baptism. Rather, its defining feature is the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, accepting Him as 'decisive for one's life'.⁹¹ Devasahayam writes: "To accept Jesus Christ as decisive for one's life means to recognize faith in Jesus as one of ultimate concern and the identity one derives in one's relationship to Christ as the most decisive identity, an identity that we constantly and continually celebrate, not only in the context of worship but in the context of our whole life."⁹² At the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Thomas stated that the "whole Gospel is for the whole man in the whole world."⁹³ For Thomas, identity in Christ becomes the foundation of Christ-centred fellowship within the Church and beyond, and thus

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 125

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.* M.M. Thomas uses Hans Kung's phrase during his correspondence with Bishop Newbigin. See M.M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues*, p. 136

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ M.M. Thomas, "Jesus Christ Frees and Unites", *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p. 296

directly relevant for life in community. Theological resonance between Devasahayam and Thomas is clear at this point.

Devasahayam affirms Thomas's criticism of the prevalent attitude of 'self-sufficient religious individualism', a theological position which denied the social implications of identity in Christ. He notes Thomas's dismay at the story of Tanjore missionaries who failed to see the connection between identity in Christ and fellowship in Christ.⁹⁴ In his work *Salvation and Humanisation* Thomas quotes a letter sent by upper caste converts in Tanjore, protesting against the call of the missionaries to renounce caste:

These missionaries, my Lord, loving filthy lucre, bid us to eat Lord's Supper with Pariahs, as lives ugly, handling dead men, drinking arrack and toddy, sweeping the streets, mean fellows altogether, base persons; contrary to that which St. Paul saith, I determined to know nothing among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.⁹⁵

In the Indian context Devasahayam is critical that Christian identity is 'subordinate' to caste identity, "sabotaging the possibility of establishing *koinonia* in the Church."⁹⁶ In words that echo Thomas, Devasahayam writes: "As Christians we need to celebrate our 'born again' identity in Christ in real terms as a 'born against' identity over all the forces/identities that disrupt *koinonia*. The Church is called to witness to new life in Christ through its life by participating in the building of a new culture. The Gospel has its message of judgement and renewal of cultures."⁹⁷ He further echoes Thomas when he writes: "Salvation in Christ is the source of new human fellowship. Those who keep a distance from others, create boundaries around them, keep themselves from the salvation fold."⁹⁸

Devasahayam also affirms the significance of Thomas's reflections upon Christ as Lord and Saviour of the world. Quoting from Thomas's *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Devasahayam observes that acknowledgement of Christ as Lord

⁹⁴ V. Devasahayam, "The Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost", K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society*, p. 126

⁹⁵ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 13

⁹⁶ V. Devasahayam, *op. cit.*, p. 126

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

and Saviour means “to become sensitive to Christ’s work in the world to make and keep human life human, to achieve maturity of men (and women), that is, the new humanity”, and essentially, “to be committed to an active love due to the least of those whom he calls brethren.”⁹⁹ Certainly M.M. Thomas has been criticised for developing a broad theology which lacks specificity. Dr. Mohan Razu argues that Thomas’s ‘universal perspective’ sacrifices essential contextual particularity.¹⁰⁰ While accepting this point, Thomas’s contribution cannot be readily dismissed. Indeed Thomas encourages context specific enquiry. Significantly, Devasahayam acknowledges Thomas’s concern to construct a theological position essentially related to the plight of the oppressed in India. He warmly affirms the frequent reference to Dalits, women and tribals in Thomas’s writing as the ‘least of these in India’.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Bishop Devasahayam supports Thomas’s assertion that the Church has a significant role in struggling with the oppressed:

The community derives its true meaning as the Church only in its relation to the broken people and their struggles for humanization. For M.M. all quests and struggles for richer and fuller human life are the works of Christ and the Church is called to identify with those deprived of their humanity. He [Thomas] also maintains that participation in the struggle of the marginalized for humanization, is an authentic imitation of Christ.¹⁰²

The Church, notes Devasahayam in words reminiscent of Thomas, is a community of proclamation of the Gospel message of the crucified and Risen Jesus as the basis for true humanisation.¹⁰³ Devasahayam states that Thomas understood ‘Church’ to be part of the world which ‘knows the nature and the historical destiny of the whole world’, urging it to proclaim the Gospel message as the only basis for true humanity.¹⁰⁴ Both Devasahayam and Thomas thus agree that the Church is called to reveal the redeeming power of God in Christ, and be involved in the

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 127. See, M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 136ff.

¹⁰⁰ Conversation with Dr. Mohan Razu, UTC, Bangalore.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² V. Devasahayam, “The Search for the Last, the Least and the Lost”, K.C. Abraham, ed. *Christian Witness in Society*, p. 127

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 128

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

“victory over evil and transformation of the world.”¹⁰⁵ The theological tension between Church and Kingdom, and the call of the Church to responsible action and proclamation within the context of the world, is clearly apparent in the theology of M.M. Thomas and Bishop Devasahayam.

Bishop Devasahayam proceeds to reference M.M. Thomas’s dismay at the Church’s tendency to support the *status quo* of traditional power structures, sharing Thomas’s frustration that the ‘powerful force’ available to the Church has become ‘rusty’ due to a theology of individual piety and compound mentality.¹⁰⁶ Agreeing with Thomas, Devasahayam calls for the Church to repent of its one-sided understanding of the Gospel.¹⁰⁷ He writes of Thomas approvingly: “During the Emergency period M.M. has demonstrated the need for prophetic criticism and even denunciation as an imperative of the proclamation of the Gospel. He emphasizes the need for the revival of the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament for maintaining human dignity and human values in the life of the Church.”¹⁰⁸ While Devasahayam is specifically concerned with Dalit indignity and oppression as a result of the caste system, critical that Thomas failed to name the caste system as the core problem of Indian society, his respect for Thomas’s prophetic criticism is nonetheless significant.

Discussing the role of the Church as a ‘reconciled and reconciling community’, Devasahayam affirms with Thomas the relevance of Christ’s redemptive work for the whole of creation. There is acknowledgement also that the New Humanity offered in Christ through the experience of ‘liberating faith’ and ‘liberating grace’ transcends the borders of the visible Church.¹⁰⁹ Thomas had approvingly quoted Paul Loeffler, who wrote: “Wherever people respond to God’s acting in history, fight injustice, wherever these things happen, there the *Basileia* is taking shape in this world, be the name of Christ consciously called over it or not”.¹¹⁰ Here Thomas demonstrates his concern for the Christian struggle to fight

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* Devasahayam quotes M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p. 135

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* Quoted from M.M. Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues*, p. 143

against injustice and oppression in a bid to transform society, demonstrating further his reflection on the theological concept of Church. Devasahayam writes of Thomas:

M.M. observes that it may be possible to be ‘outside the church’ but no one in creation can be ‘outside Christ’...M.M. says that we can only speak of either a closer or wider relationship to Christ and not inside or outside of Christ. The other religious traditions and ideologies are coming closer to each other as well as to contemporary social realities, manifesting in their life the experience of liberating grace through participation in human struggles for equality and justice to the last and the least. They are God’s instruments of salvation and hence he calls the Church to be in dialogue with them.¹¹¹

This is a significant quote, not merely because it reflects a common attitude towards the need for participation in the human struggles for equality and justice, but also in affirming that where these struggles are taking place, ‘liberating grace’ is observed as an ‘instrument of salvation’. Here the concept of Christian identity moves beyond any fixed notion of Church membership through baptism, towards recognition of the work of Christ present in the world. In light of this reality, both Devasahayam and Thomas affirm the role of the Church entering into dialogue with others, in a common bid to collaborate in the transforming and liberating work of Christ in the world.

While Bishop Devashayam echoes Thomas at this point, however, he is quick to caution against a superficial inter-faith dialogue. Devasahayam’s personal experience of inter-religious dialogue is that caste and the plight of the untouchable Dalits is *pre-excluded* from the agenda. What is the purpose of dialogical enterprise, he asks, if it is not going to help the most deprived sections of the people in India?¹¹² Devasahayam therefore cautions against any easy striving for inter-religious harmony through dialogue, warning that it is often merely *inter-upper-caste-harmony* which is sought.¹¹³ This is an essential caution which challenges the nature and purpose of inter-faith dialogue. Thomas did not directly speak to this caution, yet his vision for a Christ-centred secular fellowship sought no sanction for

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Interview, Bishop Devasahayam, 21st November, 2005

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

traditional caste prejudice or inequality. While Devasahayam and Thomas demonstrate points of theological resonance on the subject of the Christian relation to people of other faiths, Devasahayam moves beyond Thomas in order to challenge dialogical exclusivism that ignores Dalit concerns.

On the evidence presented it is clear that Bishop Devasahayam was influenced by the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas. The three factors which helped to shape and articulate Thomas's theology, namely, the struggle of the oppressed for their humanity, the relation of the Church to the Kingdom of God, and the significance of Christian dialogue with people of other faiths as a witness to Christ as source of true human community are all affirmed by Devashayam. It is this resonance which supports the research hypothesis that M.M. Thomas contributed significant theological signposts relevant to emerging Dalit theology.

3.2. New Humanity in Christ: Bishop M. Azariah

In Chapter I, Dalit identity was identified as essential for Dalit theology. The Dalit Christian quest is thus one of liberation for all Dalits, not a concern for creating a separatist Dalit Christian group. This is clear in the writings of Bishop Azariah, who notes that the goal of Dalit theology is the 'total emancipation of every Dalit victim' of enslavement, oppression and deprivation.¹¹⁴ Although in 1978 initial attempts were made by the Church to address the concerns of Schedule Caste Christians, this concern soon extended to include Dalits outside the Church.¹¹⁵

Azariah writes:

All the recent Christian writers, several of them from outcaste background themselves are convinced that any effort for the liberation of the Dalit people cannot be exclusively for Christians of Scheduled Caste origin and separately for other Scheduled caste and Scheduled tribes. This is because any true liberation will have to be in terms of New Humanity for the whole community.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ M. Azariah, "Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 165

¹¹⁵ M. Azariah, "The Indian Church and Dalit Liberation", *Christ and Dalit Liberation*, Madras: Dalit Liberation Education Trust, 1987, p. 15

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Theological questions of Christ, Church and society, and the concept of fellowship beyond the realm of Christian identity, are central to Bishop Azariah's theology. The theological paradigm of 'New Humanity in Christ' is thus, for Azariah, essentially relevant to the Dalit Christian quest for Dalit liberation.

Significantly, for Bishop Azariah, the paradigm of New Humanity in Christ is located in the broader paradigm of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation. He writes:

John 3:16 the well known central text of the Gospel affirms that God loves this world. That means, everything in this cosmos or universe, both things material and spiritual...In fact, God loves everything in creation which He saw as 'Good' when He *created* them (Gen. Ch.1). Of course the whole creation including man became separated and alienated from the creator-God by sin and dis-obedience. Hence God sent the New Adam in Jesus Christ to restore and reconcile the fallen order of Nature and Man so that in and through Christ there will emerge a totally New Creation in the place of the Old Creation. 'Behold I make *all things New*' says the Risen and ascended Jesus...Thus we can clearly see that in the plan and economy of God, He is fully interested and loves 'all things' in this world and cosmos. That is why St. Paul teaches in Romans Ch. 8:22f 'that all of creation groans with pain, like the pain of childbirth', longing for the liberation through the redemptive action of Jesus Christ in whom everything will be summed up in the end (Col. 1:20)¹¹⁷

This paradigm is not unique to Indian thinkers, yet it is clear that Thomas and Azariah theologise within a common theological framework. Both are Christo-centric, interpreting the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection as the inauguration of a New Creation ultimately consummated in Christ. Both theologians are also in theological agreement that the New Creation in Christ is a dynamic and *ongoing* process. In chapter II Thomas's rejection of Redemption as a 'return to Paradise Lost' was noted. He considered the creative process to be one that continues through history, granting responsibility for humanity to be co-creators with God until the final consummation of all things in Christ.¹¹⁸ For Azariah, the theme, "Come, Holy Spirit; Renew the Whole Creation", adopted for the Church of South India Synod,

¹¹⁷ M. Azariah, "Christian action for a New Economic Order", *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, p. 54

¹¹⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 130-131

1990, proclaimed the presence of a new reality in the world following the Resurrection of Christ.¹¹⁹ Indeed he considered it a prayer witnessing to the “ongoing process of new creation in Christ.”¹²⁰ Clearly following in the theological steps of Thomas, Azariah believed that the process of New Creation in Christ was related to three essential levels: the Inner being; the Human community; the whole Created order.

3.2.1. Renewal of Inner Being

M.M. Thomas and Bishop Azariah acknowledge that New Creation in Christ brings renewal to one’s ‘inner being’. Thomas writes: “In Christ there is the offer of a new human nature, a renewal of our inner being. ‘Therefore, if anyone is joined to Christ, he is a *new* being; the old is gone, the new has come’ (II Cor. 5). ‘Your *hearts and minds* must be made completely new. You must put on the *new self*, which is created in God’s likeness, and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy (Eph. 4:23).”¹²¹ Echoing these words, Azariah writes: “Firstly in Christ there is the offer of a new human nature and a renewal of our inner being. ‘If anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being. (2 Cor 5:17), with our hearts, minds and bodies made completely new, thus putting on the *New self* (Eph. 4:23)”¹²² In Chapter III the position of Thomas and Azariah regarding the need for conscientisation, namely the recognition of human dignity, equality and worth in the process of humanisation, was noted. Indeed this awareness of true personhood in Christ, notes Azariah, helps renew and overcome the tragedy of the internalised inferiority of the Dalit psyche:

There is a visible self-questioning among Dalit individuals today. Thus the sense of their individual worth from their very birth and dignity of the Dalit person – man and woman – everyone being equal in status to the other person, had now opened a new personhood and selfhood, that made increasing numbers of them ask who am I? The answer to the inner question is already in the air. The answer my friend is blowing in the wind – ‘You are a

¹¹⁹ M. Azariah, “Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation; Introducing the Theme of the Synod of 1990”, *The Church of South India Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, December, 1989

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ M.M. Thomas, “The New Creation in Christ”, *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976, p. 3

¹²² M. Azariah, *op. cit.* Both Thomas and Azariah also make reference to Romans 12:2 and Philippians 3:21.

Dalit'...That means 'I am no longer an untouchable; nor outcaste, nor Harijan. No. I am not a nobody. I am somebody.'¹²³

Thus, notes Azariah, the purpose and function of God through Jesus Christ is of 'Humanisation' or 'Human transformation'.¹²⁴ Theological resonance between Thomas and Azariah is clear at this point.

3.2.2. *Renewal of Human Relations*

Significantly, both M.M. Thomas and Bishop Azariah interpret New Creation in Christ as a renewal of human relations and thus of human community.

M.M. Thomas writes:

[T]he gospel of Resurrection is good news of a new human fellowship, a new community, a new humanity. Newness of life means not merely the newness of the inner being of man, but *renewal also of human relations*. Standing within the Jewish community, God's chosen people, St. Paul cannot get over the surprise and joy with which he finds that in Christ the wall of partition between the Jew and the Gentile has been done away with in a new divine-human community, the Church of Christ. Paul writes: 'He abolished the Jewish law, with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of the two races a single new people in union with himself, thus making peace' (Eph. 2:15)¹²⁵

Using the same Scripture reference, Azariah writes: "based on the fact of the resurrection, we affirm the coming new human fellowship, a new human community, a new humanity that involves a renewal of human relations. St. Paul writes that 'Christ abolished the Jewish law, with its commandments and rules in order to create out of two races a single new people in union with Himself, thus making Peace (Eph. 2:15).'¹²⁶ The implication of this reality, Azariah argues, is that there are no longer Gentiles or Jews, no circumcised or uncircumcised, no

¹²³ M. Azariah, "Introduction", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. xix

¹²⁴ M. Azariah, "The Event of Healing the Man Born Blind", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 59

¹²⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The New Creation in Christ", *New Creation in Christ*, p. 4

¹²⁶ M. Azariah, "Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation; Introducing the Theme of the Synod of 1990", *The Church of South India Churchman*, 1989

Barbarians or slaves, but that Christ is in all.¹²⁷ Thus a 'radical alternative' is now available in Christ which affects human relations within community and society.¹²⁸

Bishop Azariah considers the experience of Dalit indignity, inequality and injustice to be rooted in the problem of human relationships.¹²⁹ Indeed he views discrimination and division of human community as a 'cardinal sin',¹³⁰ against God's purpose of creating human beings for community interpersonal relationships.¹³¹ This call for interpersonal relationship, significantly, extends beyond the boundaries of the Church. He writes:

There is a need to instil in every Christian believer in the Church an inclusive spirit and attitude in the matter of relating to their immediate neighbours both within the fellowship of the Church and in the society. This is necessary to shake them out of the age-old customs and traditions that had entrenched them in their natural prejudice and even hatred towards those outside the circle of their family and community.¹³²

Bishop Azariah invites 'every Dalit brother and sister in India' to share with him a vision and hope of achieving a genuine equality and 'true humanity' for every Dalit person with every other Indian, committed to 'neighbourliness' and "harmony with every other fellow Indian citizen whatever be his caste or religion or linguistic affiliation or any other difference in our long march towards freedom and liberation for all."¹³³ In Christ the transformation of human relations has begun, breaking down the barriers of human hierarchy and inequality, moving towards equality and dignity of all beings that they may live with and alongside one another in human community and society. While Azariah is specifically concerned with the plight of the Dalits, resonance with the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas is once again clearly discernable.

¹²⁷ Colossians 3:10. *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ M. Azariah, "Peace and Human Rights", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 99

¹³⁰ M. Azariah, "Injustice and Discrimination Against Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 25

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17

¹³² M. Azariah, "Growing Together and Sharing in Unity", *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, March, 1996

¹³³ M. Azariah, "Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 173

3.2.3. *Renewal of the World*

Integrally related to the first two aspects of transformation is the renewal in Christ of the world. M.M. Thomas had written: “Thirdly, Christ brings renewal, not only to the inner being of man, not only to human relations in society, but also to the whole cosmos – ‘all things’ in heaven and on earth.”¹³⁴ Similarly, Bishop Azariah, writes:

Thirdly, when we affirm the bodily character of Jesus’ resurrection, we cannot but affirm also that humanity is closely intertwined with the world of matter, or things, of nature, i.e. the whole creation and its transformation and renewal in the same risen Christ...Hence we hope for and work towards a new Cosmos, a new universe and for the integrity of the whole creation, all because the risen Christ is the guarantee and first fruits of new creation.¹³⁵

As noted above, Thomas’s theology was shaped in part by theological discourse on the relation of the Church and the World. Indeed Thomas’s understanding of ‘Christ-centred fellowship’ in the Indian context of plurality was essentially influenced by the theological concept of Lordship of Christ over the whole created order. While an advocate of the Church, Thomas urged for new theological reflection upon what form the Church must take in India as a result of the emphasis on the *Kingdom* of God. The vocational calling of Bishop Azariah, like that of his successor Bishop Devasahayam, is to the Church. Yet the Church-Kingdom tension is also prevalent in Azariah’s writings, essentially shaping his personal theological reflections. In the Indian context, although specifically related to the concern of Dalit liberation, Azariah confesses the influence of M.M. Thomas’s theology of Christ-centred fellowship. Writing to promote the concept of the ‘Basic Ecclesial Community’ as appropriate for local congregation action towards Dalit liberation, Azariah observes:

Although a microscopic minority, the Church in India is still called upon to exercise its role as a ‘leaven’ and ‘salt’ of the earth. It has recently been acknowledged that our specific Indian situation, where Christians live in the midst of peoples of many other faiths and no faith, demanded that dialogue become an authentic means

¹³⁴ M.M. Thomas, *New Creation in Christ*, p. 6

¹³⁵ M. Azariah, “Come Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation; Introducing the Theme of the Synod of 1990”, *The Church of South India Churchman*, 1989

of Christian witness...This implies our responsibility towards our neighbours – Hindus, Muslims, Communists, etc., - apart from converting them, is to enable them to acknowledge and live by the values of the Kingdom of God, *without necessarily becoming Christians*. Recently the Indian theologian Dr. M.M. Thomas has proposed the concept of a ‘Christ-centred-secular fellowship’. I, for one, would think the best context in which such fellowships could be given shape and reality is at the local congregational level through the means of Basic Ecclesial Communities.¹³⁶

Here Azariah affirms the concept of Christ-centred *Koinoina* as relevant to the local congregational context striving for Dalit liberation. Such a paradigm is deemed relevant as a witness to the ‘values of the Kingdom of God’ in Christ. It is relevant in proclaiming Christ as decisive for one’s life without necessarily becoming Christian in the traditional sense. Direct reference to M.M. Thomas highlights the penetrative influence of Thomas in Azariah’s theology.

The paradigm of Christ centred-fellowship is primarily used by Bishop Azariah in reference to the Dalit community. In line with his quest for a Christ-centred theology of liberation for all Dalits, this paradigm becomes more relevant given the great diversity of religious, linguistic and cultural division among Dalits in India. Azariah writes: “Dalit Christian theology must facilitate every individual and communities of Dalits towards struggle for liberation, Dalits in the Church and in the Nation.”¹³⁷ Thus, the challenge for the Christian Church is to find a viable and practical ideology relevant to the quest for Dalit liberation in the pluralistic context of India. He writes:

What would be the shape of such an Ideological alternative will have to be worked out in the coming decades in dialogical relationship not only with other religious and communal minorities but also with the pre-dominant Hindu majority. Already an attempt in this direction has been made by M.M. Thomas through his proposals for, ‘Christ-centred Syncretistic Fellowship’ or through his proposed Ethics for Common Humanity in Christ for building a truly World Human Community. Our own C.S.I. theologians would have to make further explorations on these and other alternatives...the Church today needs to join with and participate

¹³⁶ M. Azariah, “The Local Congregation as an Agent of Liberation”, *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, p. 101

¹³⁷ M. Azariah, “Emerging Dalit Theologies”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 178

in all those movements in India, whether Secular, Political, Cultural Ecological or religious Movements that work for Justice, Peace and Integrity of the whole Creation.¹³⁸

Reference to M.M. Thomas is once again significant to this thesis. Clearly Azariah observes in the theology of Thomas a relevant paradigm for further exploration, calling upon Christians to come alongside secular, political, cultural and religious movements working towards justice, peace and integrity. Work for justice, peace or integrity is considered directly relevant to Christian mission and witness, calling upon the Church to be actively engaged in movements of liberation emerging beyond the Church. Although concerned primarily with a concern for Dalit liberation, the relevance of Thomas's thought in shaping Bishop Azariah's reflections is apparent.

The quote above is also to be noted for its reconciliatory tone, suggesting the need to enter into dialogical relationship with others, including the Hindu majority. This is deemed by Azariah to be essential particularly given the rise of *Hindutva* philosophy.¹³⁹ It must not be forgotten, he notes, that the task of Dalit theology concerns the liberation not only of Dalits, but also of caste-conscious oppressors.¹⁴⁰ The vision of Azariah extends to reconciliation of oppressed and oppressor. The paradigm of New Humanity in Christ provides, for Azariah, the essential theological foundation for such a vision. Azariah favours Christian dialogue with people of other faiths, believing that the process of "continuous contact and open relationship to neighbours of other faiths must be promoted."¹⁴¹ While he is disconcerted about the elitist nature of dialogue taking place in India, that it is largely conducted between 'educated and sophisticated intellectuals', he theologically supports the concept of inter-faith co-operation and dialogue.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ M. Azariah, "Growing Together and Sharing in Unity", *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, March, 1996

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ M. Azariah, "Emerging Dalit Theologies", *A Pastor's Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 179

¹⁴¹ M. Azariah, "Evangelistic Task of the Church in India Today", *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, p. 17

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

With a Christ-centred confidence in the history and destiny of humanity, Azariah encourages local Dalit communities to discover their own ideologies relevant to the struggle for liberation: “We need to perhaps look for not just one common ideology for all of India but allow different ideologies rooted and growing out of the distinct cultural and life context and situation of the different regions in our country with of course our common goal of liberation for attaining true humanity.”¹⁴³ In order for Christians to take seriously their Christian presence within the community, Azariah urges the formation of ‘Christ-centred secular fellowships’.¹⁴⁴ Such fellowships are most effective in the secular context, he suggests, bringing together persons of different faith to address local issues and concerns. This kind of fellowship, he believes, would not only enhance positive collaboration between people of different faiths, but would also save Christians from forming exclusive ‘narrow-minded closed ghettos’.¹⁴⁵ Strongly reminiscent of Thomas, Azariah gives priority to Christian laity becoming actively responsible within the day-to-day secular realm of work and community:

Jesus had already conveyed the great truth that God in Christ through his Holy Spirit is already at work in this world. (John 14:16f; Mat: 25:35-46)...Let us remember His saying ‘Behold I make all things new’ (Rev 21:5) Lay workers are invited to be His co-workers in the *New Creation*, which Christ is working out... This implies the lay Christians give particular attention to the task of peacemaking and reconciliation in our broken and disunited society. Since Christ is already at work before us we have hope and optimism for our action.¹⁴⁶

Through such open fellowship Dalits may come together in solidarity in order to address local concerns. The formation of separatist Christian groups is opposed by Azariah, for solidarity extends essentially beyond the Dalit Christian community.

From the evidence presented, it is clear that the paradigm of Christ-centred-*Koinonia* offered by M.M. Thomas had a significant influence upon Azariah’s

¹⁴³ M. Azariah, “Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2000, p. 173

¹⁴⁴ M. Azariah, “Christian Presence in Secular Professions”, *Witnessing in India Today*, Madras: United Evangelical Lutheran Churches in India, 1983, p. 137

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

theology. Certainly Azariah is more concerned with *Dalit* unity in the quest for *Dalit liberation*, yet this quest is undertaken through the paradigm of New Humanity in Christ, opening the path for a Christ-centred fellowship between Dalit Christians and Dalits of other religions. Like Thomas, this is due to a great confidence in the active presence of Christ within the world, discernable within the movements of liberation emerging in context of the Indian people.

4. Theological Differences

In conversation with V. Devasahayam, M.M. Thomas remarked: “Devasahayam, please allow some small place for non-Dalit Christians in heaven.”¹⁴⁷ The reference demonstrates a point of significant theological difference. While this thesis has argued M.M. Thomas offered significant theological signposts for the emergence of Dalit theology, it is also necessary to highlight points of theological discrepancy. In this section points of difference are identified in relation to the concept of ‘sin’ and ‘forgiveness’. Specifically this relates to the Dalit Christian interpretation of Dalits as a sinned-against messianic people. Indeed, while Thomas may be seen to be theologically sympathetic to the Dalit position, implicitly affirming the reality of sinned-against as a theological category, it is argued that Thomas’s theology cautions against the polarising interpretation of sin adopted by Dalit theologians.

4.1. Exclusive theology

From the outset, the quest for a radical Dalit counter-theology effectively set Dalit Christian theology apart from historical and contemporary theological trends prevalent in India. The search for a radical theology shaped the methodology of first generation Dalit theologians, establishing Dalit theology as an exclusive, polarising theology. Yet this methodology had significant theological consequences. Two theological concepts reinforced the dichotomy established by Dalit Christian theologians: 1) God’s ‘direct option’ for the Dalits; 2) Dalits as the ‘sinned-against’.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Bishop Devasahayam, CSI Diocesan Office, Chennai, 21st November, 2005

4.1.1. God's Direct Option for Dalits

The concept of 'God's preferential option for the poor' penned by Latin American Liberation Theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, gained momentum in global theological discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century. The 1980 Melbourne meeting of the Commission on World Evangelism used the phrase to refer to the identification of Jesus Christ with the poor, calling for solidarity with the poor and the oppressed as a central priority for Christian mission.¹⁴⁸ Referencing the Melbourne Conference during our interview, Bishop Azariah remarked: "Nonsense! This is not a preferential option; it is a direct option. Jesus had no other option."¹⁴⁹ Azariah added that Jesus had been born in a manger with sheep and shepherds; it was the shepherds who heard the proclamation 'Your Saviour is born today'; Jesus went to the 'lowest rung straight', direct from 'Heaven to manger'.¹⁵⁰ Referring to the parable of the Rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) Azariah argued that although Lazarus had no qualification, he 'went straight to the lap of Abraham'.¹⁵¹ Bishop Azariah writes:

It is quite clear Jesus was not merely having an 'option to the poor'; nor merely a 'bias towards the poor' but was literally and physically 'siding with the poor'. Nay more; indeed He went much more closer to identify with the least, the poorest of the poor to the extent that He would own them as His 'brothers and sisters' as blood relations. They were in complete union with Him and He with them. So He would say, 'I am the one who is hungry, or thirsty, or naked, or as a stranger or sick or in prison' in His discourse about the Last Judgement (Matt. 25: 31-46). Such is the nature of His gift of reconciliation that begins with His Incarnation in Bethlehem and consummates with His identification with the least people.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ The phrase 'God's preferential option for the poor' had originally been used at the Pueblo Conference of Latin American Catholic Bishops, 1979. See the Global Ministries of the Christian Church and the United Church of Christ article, "Missiology: Models of Mission in the 20th Century Ecumenical Movement", 27 July, 2006,

http://www.globalministries.org/index.php?Itemid=249&id=1356&option=com_content&task=view

¹⁴⁹ Interview with M. Azariah, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Chennai, 19th November, 2005

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² M. Azariah, *Mission in Christ's Way in India Today*, Madras: CLS, 1989, p. 7

Amidst the context of the hierarchical caste-graded context of India, Azariah states that God's direct option for the poor essentially refers to the lowest of Indian society, in particular the Scheduled Caste Dalits.

The theology of M.M. Thomas, notes Azariah, while rightly being concerned with the issue of human freedom, neglects the essential question of *God's* freedom. Thomas's emphasis on human freedom had encouraged all to choose 'life' in relationship with God and humanity. Azariah challenges this one-sided concern, which encouraged the 'dehumanised' to search both in and outside the Church for God in order to become 'humanised in Christ'.¹⁵³ Azariah asks: "But what about God's freedom?" responding, "God chooses the subhuman."¹⁵⁴ He adds that the poor are *already redeemed*, although they may not know it. The need for Jesus Christ, he adds, is simply that they may know of their redemption.

Bishop Azariah extends his position to suggest that Dalits require no redemption from sin.¹⁵⁵ Prompting the Bishop to clarify his point, he acknowledged that sin is a reality for Dalits, but that this sin comes from external forces outside of themselves. Referring to the story of Jesus' encounter with Legion (Mk. 5), a man whose internal condition results from external demons, Azariah argued that Dalits have been affected internally by the external force of caste system.¹⁵⁶ In other words, while sin exists for Dalits, this sin is a result of external force, thus denying full responsibility of Dalits for their sin. Despite the presence of sin, there is no need for redemption from such sin because God 'directly opts' for them in their Dalitness.

This position raises certain crucial questions, highlighting the problematic nature of defining God's salvific option in exclusive terms. Who, exactly, are the subhumanised Azariah is referring to? Above we noted that Azariah identifies the Dalits as the lowest in Indian society, but significantly he *also* names the Scheduled Tribes and women (presumably both Dalit and non-Dalit) within this category.¹⁵⁷ Thus there is little clarity in determining *who* is entitled to be a part of God's direct option. Here, the question 'who is Dalit' becomes key. This in itself becomes

¹⁵³ Conversation with Bishop Azariah, 20th November, 2005

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ M. Azariah, *Mission in Christ's Way in India Today*, Madras: CLS, 1989, p. 7

problematic, depending on the perspective of the person asked. Certainly there is acknowledged tension between hierarchical Dalit communities themselves, as noted in chapter I. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter in light of critical observations made by current Dalit students of theology. Certainly Azariah uses the term God's direct option in reference to all Dalits in general terms, but is perhaps inevitably ambiguous regarding who falls into this category.

A second comment reflects the inevitable tension created by Azariah's point of departure from Gutiérrez's 'preferential option for the poor'. Gutiérrez defended the use of the term 'preferential' by locating it within an essential position of universality:

I have often met people who find it strange to use the term 'preference'. Would it not be better to say simply 'option for the poor' since 'preferential' sounds too gentle? I do not agree. Preference implies the universality of God's love, which excludes no-one. It is only within the framework of this universality that we can understand the preference, that is, 'what comes first'.¹⁵⁸

Replacing the term 'preferential' with 'direct', Azariah's exclusive theological language suggests a bold point of departure from Gutiérrez. Yet the consequence of such a shift raises essential questions concerning Azariah's interpretation of the nature of God's universal love. Emphasising God's love for the oppressed in boldly exclusive terms, Azariah appears to narrow down the limits of God's love. How is God's *direct* option for the Dalits therefore to be understood in relation to God's love for all? Indeed, Azariah's concern to emphasise the reconciliatory nature of Dalit theology, envisioning a reconciled liberation between oppressed Dalits and oppressor non-Dalits, has been noted, implying God's love for all. Azariah's theology thus becomes ambiguous at this point.

4.1.2. Dalits: The Sinned Against

Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam both strongly affirmed during interview the theological category of 'sinned-against' as appropriate for Dalit theology. Bishop Azariah deemed this concept as 'beautiful' for understanding Dalit

¹⁵⁸ James B. Nickoloff, ed. *Gustavo Gutiérrez: Essential Writings*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 145

reality,¹⁵⁹ for the Dalit nation is “more sinned against than sinning”.¹⁶⁰ Bishop Devasahayam responded with equal vigour: “The upper caste are the oppressors and the untouchables are the oppressed. They are sinners and these [Dalits] are the sinned against.”¹⁶¹ The exclusive methodology adopted by first generation Dalit Christian theologians here becomes manifest in a position of theological exclusivity.

Bishop Devasahayam offers further insight into the Dalit position in an article entitled “Turn to God-Rejoice in Hope: A Dalit Perspective”.¹⁶² This article was written prior to the World Council of Churches Assembly of Harare, 1998, whose theme was ‘Turn to God-Rejoice in Hope’. Reflecting on the title Devasahayam makes two critical observations relevant to the research investigation. First, he writes:

[t]he theme’s call ‘Turn to God-rejoice in Hope’ does not recognise the polarity of our context as oppressors and the oppressed. The two fold identities of caste and outcaste are to be understood primarily in terms of consciousness, of relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed. Caste identity in spite of plurality, is a corporate single identity as oppressors. Outcaste identity represents that of an oppressed identity.¹⁶³

Here the distinction between oppressed and oppressor provides a neat, dichotomous framework in which to categorize Dalits and non-Dalits. Thus, Dalits are identified as the oppressed and the non-Dalits as oppressors. Once this framework is established the theological concept of sin is interpreted accordingly. Devasahayam continues:

The call ‘Turn to God’ is based on Pauline dictum of universality of sin for “all have sinned”. Here no effort is made to eulogize the Dalits and absolve Dalits of all sin, but in one condition as belonging to the victim sector, our sins cannot be equated with those of the oppressor sector. The sins among Dalits belong mostly to emulation or reaction. That is why Jesus categorises people as little ones who stumble and those who make them to stumble (Mt. 18: 6-7) He did not make a blind universal statement. In the

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ M. Azariah, “Towards a More Radical Approach to Dalit Liberation”, *A Pastor’s Search for Dalit Theology*, p. 171

¹⁶¹ Interview with Bishop Devasahayam, 21st November, 2005

¹⁶² V. Devasahayam, “Turn to God-Rejoice in Hope: A Dalit Perspective”, *The South Indian Churchman*, Chennai: CSI Synod, November, 1998

¹⁶³ *Ibid.* p. 9

parable of the Judgement of the Nations, is depicted, in fact not two, but three categories of people; the sheep (the righteous) the goats (the accursed) and “the least of these who are members of my family” (Mt. 25:31-46)¹⁶⁴

Certainly Devasayaham is careful to acknowledge the reality of sin among Dalits, although he does not clarify his position, content to claim sin as merely ‘emulation’ or ‘reaction’ to ‘external forces’. His primary concern is to differentiate between the sin of the oppressed and the sin of the oppressors. The Gospel of Matthew is referenced to emphasise Jesus’ categorisation of two groups, one made up of ‘those who stumble’, and the other of those who ‘make them stumble’. Devasahayam’s point is further reinforced by distinguishing between the righteous, the accursed, and a third group, the ‘least’, implying a familial connection between Jesus and Dalits.

Devasahayam’s second point relates to the two fold message which appears as a result of the hyphenated title of the WCC Conference. He writes:

Turn to God-Rejoice in Hope. One could immediately recognise these two calls as having two groups of addresses the oppressor sector and the oppressed sector respectively. It is the oppressor who needs to turn to God, forsaking false gods while the oppressed need to have Hope to rejoice in the midst of present hopelessness. The message of repentance is addressed to the rich and the powerful, against their unjust designs of exploitation and oppression; the victim sector is comforted and encouraged through a new vision of hope in God’s vindication. Jesus’ teachings calling for repentance were addressed mostly to the murmuring Jews, Pharisees and Scribes, who thought of themselves as superior and despised others. We have two groups of sayings the *Beatitudes* and the *woe sayings* of Jesus keeping in view the victim sector and the oppressor sector respectively (Mt. 5; Mt. 23).¹⁶⁵

This second point builds upon the first to include the concept of ‘repentance’. Once two polarised categories are established, it becomes easy to apply one message for one and one to the other. This Devasahayam does, neatly attributing the ‘Beatitudes’ of Jesus as relevant to the oppressed victims, and the ‘woe sayings’ as relevant to the caste oppressor. Thus, the *oppressor* is in need of repentance from the sin of

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10

exploitation and oppression conducted upon the victim. Caste Christians, accordingly, are called to “confess their sin of participating in a demonic system”, a confession essential for receiving ‘new life’.¹⁶⁶ There is no benefit to being ‘born again’ if one is not ‘born against’ caste identity: “The experience of repentance, the process of dying to caste identity and rising to new identity in Christ is certainly painful, but without it there is no life. Paul, while responding to God’s call on the Damascus Road, gave up his pride (Phil. 3) and identified with the oppressed.”¹⁶⁷

There is no mention here of the need for the victim to repent, for they may find ‘comfort and encouragement’ in the new vision of hope offered through the vindication of God. Devasahayam goes further by suggesting that ‘Turning to God’ also means recognising the ‘Messianic character’ of the oppressed. As Jesus conceived Himself as the ‘Son of Man’, representative of the ‘oppressed collective’, the oppressed Dalits are to be understood as ‘the historical continuation of Jesus’.¹⁶⁸ This Messianic character of the Dalits, Devasahayam argues, is demonstrated by the reality of Dalit suffering on behalf of others in Indian society:

We become a polluting people for keeping other people clean. We are doing the scavenging to keep other people clean and in the process become polluting people. In order to keep other people rich, we become poor... We lay the roads on which we are prevented from walking. We build houses where we cannot enter in. We dig wells – the water is not going to quench our thirst and we die. How else are we described – the Messianic character of Jesus.¹⁶⁹

Devasahayam’s position reinforces the counter theological polarity of Dalit Christian theology, and has significant consequences for the theological understanding of forgiveness. Devasahayam asks: “What is salvation... within the polarized context of the oppressor and the oppressed?” His response, referring to caste Christians, is to claim: “You repent, ask for forgiveness and there you will have your salvation. It is as the oppressors recognize that they have sinned against

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* Here Bishop Devasahayam refers to Kim Yong Bok’s assertion that “Minjung is the Messiah and the Messiah is the Minjung”. See, Yong-Bok Kim, “Jesus Christ among Asian Minjung: A Christological Reflection”, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=46>

¹⁶⁹ Interview with Bishop Devasahayam, 21st November, 2005

these people. Ask for their forgiveness, then they have their salvation.”¹⁷⁰ As a Messianic Dalit people, therefore, ‘caste Christians’ may recognise Dalits as ‘their hope of redemption’:

The apostolic preaching was clear: “the Jesus whom you crucified, the Lord raised him as Lord.” The call to Turn to God, in reality means, to recognise one’s victim as one’s hope. Its truth challenges caste Christian leaders in churches and institutions in terms of reordering power relations. It calls for establishing a new community based on caste Christians’ repentance and Christian dalits’ forgiveness.¹⁷¹

The experience of forgiveness is thus essential to Devasahayam’s theological vision of church as a reconciled and reconciling community.¹⁷² Here, ‘forgiveness’ and ‘repentance’ are placed within a polarised theological framework; caste Christians repent, Dalits forgive.

Recognising the dangers inherent in a use of rigid polarising categories, however, Devasahayam is quick to add his own caution: “I may be socially oppressed. I may be socially sinned against, but I am also a sinner, and I receive God’s forgiveness every day, so I am duty bound to forgive anyone who truly repents.”¹⁷³ Thus, while in the capacity of Dalit identity vis-à-vis caste identity the Dalit needs ‘no redemption’,¹⁷⁴ this does not absolve Dalit Christians from the need for forgiveness. For example, gender discrimination and oppression, recognised as a central concern by Dalit Christian theologians, means that “dalits are as much under judgement and are in need of forgiveness as the caste people.”¹⁷⁵ As a corporate identity, therefore, Devasahayam uses the term ‘sinned against’, while acknowledging that at an individual level, sin is a reality in the daily lives of Dalits. Despite this essential caution, however, the overwhelming emphasis in Devasahayam’s theology is on the corporate sinned-against reality of Dalit existence.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ V. Devasahayam, “Turn to God-Rejoice in Hope: A Dalit Perspective”, p. 12

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Interview with Bishop Devasahayam, 21st November, 2005

¹⁷⁴ V. Devasahayam, *op. cit.*, p. 12

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

In the final Chapter these points of theological disagreement will be discussed further, critically engaging with second generation Dalit theologians in order to assess the relevance of M.M. Thomas's thought for Dalit theological discourse today. It will be argued that although Thomas accepts the theological affirmation of God's solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, and the reality of 'sinned-against' as a theological category, his theology ultimately cautions against these concepts being interpreted in exclusive and absolute terms.

5. Conclusion

In this Chapter M.M. Thomas's theological articulation of *koinonia*-in-Christ, set within the broader paradigm of New Humanity in Christ, was evaluated in light of emerging Dalit theological discourse. It has been shown that the influence of Thomas's theology, framed within the contextual shifts taking place in global and Indian theological discourse, is clearly evident in the theology of Bishop Azariah and Bishop Devasahayam. The awakening of the poor and the oppressed for social liberation, the Church-world debate, and the emergence of renascent religions and secular ideologies within the context of India, were shown to essentially shape Thomas's theological questions and deliberations. The paradigm of Christ-centred secularism attempted to hold together the many theological tensions arising within such a dynamic context. In the context of Dalit theology, which seeks to maintain the essential link between Christian and non-Christian Dalits in the quest for Dalit liberation, Thomas's contribution becomes significantly relevant. Thomas's articulation of *koinonia*-in-Christ sought to transcend communal barriers, blurring the theological distinction between the Church and the world, sacred and secular realm. The paradigm of New Humanity in Christ posited by M.M. Thomas, which offered a theological foundation for social transformation, is both affirmed and strongly evident in the writings of Azariah and Devasahayam, demonstrating the influence of Thomas's theology in emerging Dalit thought.

Essential theological differences between Thomas and first generation Dalit theologians were also identified, including Dalit reflections of sin and forgiveness within a framework of methodological exclusivism. The concept of Dalits as the

'direct option of God', and of the Dalits as the 'sinned-against' were acknowledged as significant points of departure from M.M. Thomas. In the final Chapter, these theological points of disagreement will be examined in greater detail through discourse with second generation Dalit theologians in order to assess the relevance of Thomas's theology for Dalit discourse today.

Chapter VI: Critical Reflections of Second Generation Dalit Theologians

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter M.M. Thomas's reflections upon the paradigm of *koinonia*-in Christ was identified as significant for Dalit theologians seeking to formulate a theological paradigm relevant for the liberation of Christian and non-Christian Dalits. This paradigm, which falls within the broader theological paradigm of New Humanity in Christ, maintains the centrality of Christ within the context of religious and cultural plurality, becoming essentially relevant to the struggle for transformed society. Key points of departure between M.M. Thomas and first generation Dalit theologians were also identified. Given the diachronic nature of Dalit theology, the final chapter incorporates critical reflections of twelve second generation Dalit Christian theological students from United Theological College, Bangalore.¹ Based upon critical methodological and theological reflections on Dalit theology, the students provide an invaluable perspective against which the contribution of M.M. Thomas may be assessed as relevant for theological discourse today. Indeed it is argued that critical engagement with M.M. Thomas redresses some of the concerns raised by the students in relation to first generation Dalit theology. This is not to suggest that Thomas's theology can be accepted uncritically by Dalit theologians today, but rather that a dynamic encounter between the theology of M.M. Thomas and Dalit theology provides a significant source of theological renewal relevant to the ongoing movement of Christian theology in India.

¹ For reasons of anonymity, student names will appear as Old Testament characters.

2. Student reflections

Prior to his participation in the study one of the students asked why I was interested in the theology of M.M. Thomas. The new movement in theology, he suggested, is Dalit theology; the theology of M.M. Thomas was past.² A second student confessed his doubt that Thomas's theology could be at all relevant for Dalit theology. Following the group discussion, however, he admitted to a change in attitude:

When I first read I didn't think that he [Thomas] spoke for Dalits, but then I had the discussion along with our friends on the floor and really the liberation point of things seemed really connected with the Dalit...I read plainly what he says, what he preached. I can critique what he said. But when we came for the discussion the whole attempt to look at the material was totally changed. From the Dalit perspective I read what he has for Dalit...I really enjoyed that.³

This comment reflects the shift that took place during the period of student participation, and the enthusiasm with which students engaged in the study. Initial scepticism on the part of the students turned into positive, critical discussion, prompting many informal conversations during my research visit. This point is significant beyond fond reminiscence, for it demonstrates the interest generated in engaging with M.M. Thomas's theology from a Dalit perspective.

2.1. Methodology

Student participation in the thesis research had two phases. The first involved group discussion on three of Thomas's sermons,⁴ presented to each student well before the meeting. Students were divided into three small groups in order to reflect on the sermons, offering their observations to the wider group for further discussion. The group session took place over a two hour period. The second phase involved personal interviews, or 'purposeful conversations' with individual students as a follow up to the group discussion, each lasting approximately one hour. The research

² Informal conversation; Elijah

³ Informal conversation; Isaiah

⁴ The sermons were taken from M.M. Thomas, *New Creation in Christ*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1976

was built on and essentially benefited from life in community with the students over a period of five months.

2.2. Reflections on M.M. Thomas's Sermons

2.2.1. The New Creation in Christ

In the first of the three sermons, M.M. Thomas discusses the newness of life in Christ, including the renewal of the inner being, human relations, and the cosmos.⁵ He writes:

In world history there is a movement of renewal of all things, which is taking place in Jesus Christ and through Him...this renewal is a partial realisation in the experience of the Risen Christ in the present, but will be fully realised at the end of time... We live between the times of the 'Already' and the 'Not Yet' of renewal. The New Age has been inaugurated in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Age will be consummated in Him in the end.⁶

Thomas argues that renewal of the inner being includes a renewal of the mind and the body as a part of one's personality. This includes a partial realisation of renewal and healing of the body through Christ's power, experienced daily, providing a "constant renewal of strength in the inner being through the realisation of the living power of the Risen Christ."⁷

Reflecting upon Thomas's observation, the first small group commented: "Dalits are politically powerless, economically Dalits are penniless, literally they are the weakest, so what is...the renewal of the body? Dalits, though they produce food for the whole country, they don't have food to eat. In this context, what does it mean the renewal of the body?"⁸ The question is born from the existential reality of Dalit oppression, thus essentially challenging Thomas's interpretation of the renewal of the body in Christ. This remains an important challenge, yet it is important to note that in using the term 'renewal of the body' Thomas emphasised the need for physical and material welfare of humanity. Indeed Thomas shared Nicholas

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁸ Small group reflections.

Berdyayev's concern over the common attitude which proclaimed: "My daily bread is a material problem. The daily bread of my neighbour is a spiritual problem."⁹

Thomas rejects a spirit-body dichotomy, understanding body and spirit to be integrally related within human personality. Renewal in Christ, therefore, essentially includes the "liberation of the weaker sections in society like the poor, the captives, the blind and oppressed and the offer of justice to their humanity... The reign of God which powerfully entered human history in Jesus Christ proclaims liberation from all kinds of slavery, both personal and social or individualistic and structural."¹⁰

Renewal of the body is thus interpreted in relation to Thomas's concern for the welfare of the poor and the oppressed, and in their struggle for social and economic justice. Theological reflection on the nature of humanisation in Christ lies at the heart of Thomas's theology, stressing the material and physical well being of the human being as an essential part of human personality. While Thomas's theology does not reflect the experience of Dalit pathos, this theological contribution remains relevant to Dalit theological discourse today.

A second aspect of 'newness in Christ' relates to a renewal of human relations. Thomas writes:

Paul writes: 'He abolished the Jewish law, with its commandments and rules, in order to create out of two races a single new people in union with himself, thus making peace.' (Eph. 2:15) Note the phrase 'a single new people', denoting a new reality introduced in a situation where there is mutual hostility and exclusiveness between two peoples. The new humanity in Christ transcends the deep religious division between the Jewish and the Gentile communities. Speaking elsewhere, Paul says that this fellowship in Christ transcends not only the religious divisions but also all divisions created in society by nature, culture or history.¹¹

The message of fellowship in the Risen Christ thus remains "extremely relevant and challenging today, when men and women everywhere are seeking to build new societies in which there is a true community among men, and working towards

⁹ See, M.M. Thomas, "The Meaning of Salvation Today – A Personal Statement", T. Jacob Thomas, ed. *M.M. Thomas Reader: Selected Texts on Theology, Religion and Society*, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2002, p. 86

¹⁰ M.M. Thomas, *God the Liberator*, trans. T.M. Philip, Tiruvalla: CSS, 2004, p. 28

¹¹ M.M. Thomas, "The New Creation in Christ", p. 4

world community.”¹² In particular Thomas views this paradigm as relevant to the Indian context, arguing that the impact of fellowship in Christ is to be witnessed in the modern transformation of caste structure.¹³

Commenting on this aspect of the sermon, the second small group were encouraged by Thomas’s emphasis on the genuine ‘possibility of change’ in Christ.¹⁴ Thomas moved beyond the traditional theological focus on the individual to include the transformation of social relations within society. The group observed that Thomas “brings it very clearly that as against traditional theology where newness stopped at the level of the individual, Thomas tried to bridge the gap by relating newness in individual and relating that to newness in community and unity in cosmos.”¹⁵ The students considered this point significant, opening the possibility for change in the structures of the Church and Indian society, both of which had been corrupted by caste.¹⁶ Thomas’s reference to the new humanity in Christ transcending social barriers seemed particularly relevant given the reality of caste division prevalent in the church and Indian society.¹⁷ The group appreciated Thomas’s naming of caste as a reality within the Church, as well as the theological assertion that Christ brought a ‘disturbance’ to this reality.¹⁸ For Dalit theologians seeking to overcome the prevalence of caste-based discrimination within the Church and beyond through the transformation of individual and social relations, Thomas’s theology is recognised as resonant with, and relevant for Dalit theological discourse today.

The third small group, made up of the two Dalit women in the group, Esther and Miriam, affirmed the paradigm of newness in Christ as essential for overcoming the sinful human-made divisions prevalent in the Indian context: “God has created everything; He gave everything equal to the human, but the humans are the ones who divide and separate the ruling power according to their status. But Jesus came and demolished all these distinctions and created the human...Jesus demolished

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 6

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

¹⁴ Small group reflections.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

everything and brought the true newness [as] M.M. Thomas quotes.¹⁹ Despite this affirmation, however, the women could not accept such a paradigm uncritically, commenting:

From the first [sermon]...where M.M. Thomas says that Jesus Christ has died and is resurrected and brought a newness in life, and brought a new world and a new creation. So our question is, Jesus Christ has died for our sins, but we see that sin is still continuous in our community. Then how should we call this as the new world and the new creation?²⁰

As theologians training for Christian ministry, both women accept the *paradigm* of newness in Christ as directly relevant for Dalit Christian theology, accepting in faith that Jesus offered something new for the world. In the context of continued Dalit oppression, however, ‘how should we call this as the new world and the new creation?’ The tension between faith in the resurrection and hope for the renewal of life in the present, that is, the relation between the ‘already’ and the ‘not yet’ of renewal in Christ, is clearly expressed here. Indeed, Thomas accepts that this tension is one of the most difficult to comprehend theologically.²¹ Yet the women’s question indicates an essential *epistemological* point of departure from M.M. Thomas. As Dalit women, considered ‘Dalits of the Dalits’,²² the question posed by Esther and Miriam reflects the experience of pathos as victims of caste and gender oppression. Theological reflections upon newness in Christ are thus undertaken based on the apparent ‘absence’ of newness evidenced within the Dalit context.

M.M. Thomas sought to discern Christ’s presence and influence both inside and outside the Church, as testified in his work *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. Thomas’s Christ-centred optimism in the emerging religious and secular movements, as well as his desire to discern and witness to Christ in those movements, suggests that he was concerned less with critical theological questions regarding the *absence* of God in the lives of the oppressed. The lop-sided attention

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ M.M. Thomas, “Hard to Handle”, *One World*, April, 1978, p. 17

²² See, Aruna Gnanadason, “Dalit Women – the Dalit of the Dalit”, Arvind P. Nirmal, ed. *Towards a Common Dalit Ideology*, Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1989, pp. 109-120

given to the presence as oppose to the absence of Christ is critically challenged by Esther and Miriam who see little renewal in the lives of Dalits. Thus, while it may be argued that the theological contribution of Thomas remains relevant, the epistemological difference resulting from the experience of oppression essentially sharpens the theological debate concerning the renewal of Christ within the world.

2.2.2. The Cross and the Kingdom of God

In the second sermon Thomas reflects upon the Cross and the Kingdom of God, arguing that the Cross is a revelation of God's character as Love, and the point at which the Kingdom of God is inaugurated in human history. He writes: "The Cross reveals God and His purpose for His whole creation as Love. It gives the assurance that the universe has at its centre not a Chaos, not even a cold calculating mind, but a Cross - i.e. a heart throbbing for all men with understanding, suffering and forgiving love."²³ The message of the Cross as love, notes Thomas, had a significant appeal and impact on Hindu and Muslim leaders of the modern Indian renaissance, in particular as the "eternal God's way of fighting evil through suffering love."²⁴ Thomas references Gandhi's use of the term 'the Way of the Cross' during India's struggle for Independence, and A.G. Hogg's reference to the Crucifixion of Jesus as the 'Transcendent Satyagraha' of God, through which God delivered the world from evil in order to reconcile the world to God-self.²⁵

A prominent theme in the sermon is the obedience of Jesus to the will of God. Jesus, he notes, was 'intensely conscious' that he was the Messiah through whom the Kingdom was to be inaugurated, and that he was to fulfil the role of the 'Suffering Servant' in order for the Kingdom to come in power.²⁶ Christ "set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem, looking forward to His death as a crucial historical event through which the New Age of God was to be established."²⁷ Thomas adds:

²³ M.M. Thomas, "The Cross and the Kingdom of God", *New Creation in Christ*, p, 18

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16

²⁵ *Ibid.* *Satyāgraha* is a word of Sanskrit origin, meaning 'Truth force'. See, Mahatma Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 3rd Edition, Vol. 19, New Delhi: Government of India, 1979, p. 466

²⁶ M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 19

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Peter speaks of the Crucifixion of Jesus as having happened ‘by the deliberate will and plan of God’. It was the cup which Jesus shrank from but drank in utter obedience to the deliberate will and plan of God. As St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, Jesus ‘humbled himself and in obedience accepted death even death – death on a Cross’ (Phil. 2:8)²⁸

The Cross, therefore, becomes not only the symbol of God’s eternal love, but also a ‘decisive historical event’ in which the world is judged and forgiven by God, bringing humanity to righteousness, enabling every person to become a brother and sister for whom Christ died.²⁹ The Cross is,

Christ’s victory through which God has brought judgement and redemption for all mankind and the whole creation. The Cross means the divine forgiveness and the formation of a new community of forgiven sinners as the foretaste of a new humanity. The Cross means power, not of self-righteousness but of grace, and power to do the good one wishes, and power to live. Jesus said: ‘In the world you will have trouble. But courage: victory is mine. I have conquered the world.’ (John 16:33) In identifying ourselves with the Cross of Christ, we are not promised deliverance from having to face the troubles but courage to face them, and the strength to grapple with the evils in us and around us, because we know the Crucified and Risen Jesus remains the power of the Kingdom, operating in us and in the world today.³⁰

Commenting upon the second sermon, the first small group affirmed Thomas’s interpretation of the Cross as a revelation of God’s love for humanity, and as a historical event that brings judgement to oppressive powers in the world.³¹ The judgement and deliverance from oppressive structures within the world was considered essentially relevant for Dalit theology.³² Yet the group also raised critical questions. The first concerned the concept of ‘obedience’ to the Cross for deliverance. They asked: “Can it be a paradigm for liberation? Can obedience be interpreted to the advantage of the status quo?”³³ Secondly the group questioned

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Small group reflections.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

Thomas's reference to Hogg's use of the term *satyāgraha*,³⁴ a term originally associated with Gandhi's concept of passive resistance in the movement for non-violent resistance during the Independence struggle.³⁵ The students asked "Can we go beyond just passive resistance?"³⁶

Commenting on Thomas's suggestion that Christ provides the courage to face daily troubles but not deliver humans from their troubles, the second small group questioned whether this was to be understood as a 'pill' for Dalits to swallow in order to reduce their pain, or a source of strength and courage enabling Dalits to be equipped in the struggle to overcome their plight.³⁷ The students rejected the concept of a theological pill which merely serves to numb the existential pain of Dalit suffering. Their theological quest is for a paradigm relevant to the struggle for Dalit liberation, allowing them to participate in the struggle for personal and social transformation. Given the experience of Dalit oppression resulting from theological and ideological hegemony, these are crucial questions. A hermeneutics of suspicion is demanded by Dalit theologians regarding any paradigm which may be interpreted to reinforce the subordinate status of Dalits.

When we examine the position of M.M. Thomas it becomes clear that he shares the concerns raised by the students, demonstrating significant points of resonance with their theological caution and vision. Thomas makes a useful and necessary distinction between the 'nationalist messianism of Conquering King' and the 'universal messianism of the Suffering Servant',³⁸ conscious of the human tendency to self-righteousness which turns movements of liberation against their own goals of justice and freedom. Christianity, and indeed all revolutionary movements and ideologies, are caught in the "tragic dialectics between human destiny understood in terms of the Suffering Servant and that defined by the Grand

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ The term 'passive resistance' was later dropped by Gandhi, who wrote: "I often used "passive resistance" and "satyagraha" as synonymous terms: but as the doctrine of satyagraha developed, the expression "passive resistance" ceases even to be synonymous, as passive resistance...has been universally acknowledged to be a weapon of the weak." Mahatma Gandhi, *op. cit.*, p. 466

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Small group reflections.

³⁸ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Madras: CLS, 1975, Preface, p. v

Inquisitor, between the self-giving of love and the self-aggression of power.”³⁹ The human struggle, therefore, is against “false spiritualities of the idolatry of race, nation and class and of the self-righteousness of ideals which reinforces collective structures of inhumanity and oppression.”⁴⁰ Influenced by Nicolas Berdyaev, Thomas writes:

With faith in the Crucified Jesus as the Christ of God, Christianity becomes the religion of the Suffering Messiah *per se*. But in its history, Christianity yields to the temptation of the Kingdoms of this world which Jesus rejected in his temptation in the wilderness, and reverts back to the idea of the Conquering Messiah... The path of messianism of conquest which mankind tends to follow cannot but end in some new form of slavery or inhuman totalitarianism.⁴¹

The Cross of Christ is the central theological paradigm of liberation for M.M. Thomas, for at its heart lies the judgement and forgiveness of sinful humanity. The paradigm of the Cross, interpreted within the broader theological paradigm of creation-fall-redemption and consummation, allows humanity to actively participate in the new humanity offered in Christ. Yet Thomas is conscious here of the temptation for Christianity to yield to the Kingdoms of the world, pursuing a messianism of conquest which leads to continued or new forms of slavery and inhuman totalitarianism. He is thus deeply conscious of the potential for the Cross to be interpreted in favour of the status quo, rejecting such an interpretation as inherently sinful.

Certainly the messianic concept of Suffering Servant becomes problematic if there is a glorified righteousness associated with suffering itself, or a passive acceptance of suffering. Such passive acceptance was the concern of the first small group noted above. Again resonance is apparent within Thomas’s writings. Urging a ‘spirituality for combat’, Thomas called for a challenge against structures of oppression and injustice sanctioned by “demonic spirits of idolatry of race, nation

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37

⁴⁰ M.M. Thomas, “Spirituality for Combat”, Moderator’s Speech, WCC, Nairobi, 1975, in Roger Hedlund, *Roots of the Great Debate in Mission*, 4th Edition, Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 2002, p. 370

⁴¹ M.M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, pp. 35-7. See, Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R.M. French, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952, pp. 197-213

and class.”⁴² In Chapter III Thomas’s emphasis on human participation in the struggle for humanisation and justice against oppressive forces was noted. He rejected any notion of passivity, demanding that the people themselves be empowered to actively participate in such a struggle, rooted in a theological interpretation of the human person created as a transcendent being called to active and responsible participation in building true human community. Interpreted within the framework of New Humanity in Christ, Thomas agrees with Paul Lehmann that messianism is the necessary spiritual basis for a revolutionary humanism and the humanisation of society in the modern world.⁴³ Yet this must not be a messianism of ‘Conquering King’, but rather of the ‘Crucified Messiah’, which seeks not to underline passive non-violence or the renunciation of power, but rather to link power-politics and even violence if necessary to the “ultimacy of life in any situation to keep it human”.⁴⁴ It is argued, therefore, that Thomas’s interpretation of the Cross cautions against passive suffering and supports active participation in the struggle against forces of injustice, indignity and inequality.

M.M. Thomas believed the power to participate in the struggle for human liberation was to be found in Christ. Thomas writes that the “power which raised Jesus Christ from the dead...is available to those who identify themselves with the spiritual combat against principalities and powers in the world which the Cross represents.”⁴⁵ In line with the student caution, Thomas rejects the notion of the Cross as a pill to swallow in order to relieve the pain of the struggle, regarding it as a source of power in order to ‘grapple with the evils in us and around us’.

The Dalit student concern over the hegemonic potential of any paradigm calling for ‘obedience’ or ‘passivity’ is significant, demanding an ongoing and critical challenge in the quest for a relevant theological paradigm for liberation. Thus the Cross as a paradigm reflecting the Kingship of Christ cannot be accepted uncritically. While M.M. Thomas did not view the paradigm of the Cross through

⁴² M.M. Thomas, Editorial, “The Search for a New Spirituality”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXV, No. 1, March, 1978, pp. 3-4

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. See, Paul Louis Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context*, New York & London: Harper & Row, 1976

⁴⁴ M.M. Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4

the same epistemological lens as the Dalit students, his insights remain significant to Dalit theological discourse, eager to stand opposed to a messianism of conquering King and against forces of oppression that deny humanity, justice, and dignity. Indeed, it is within the heart of this struggle that Thomas's sought to make theology challengingly relevant to the people.

2.2.3. The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History

In the third sermon, delivered at the valedictory service at United Theological College, Bangalore, M.M. Thomas emphasised to outgoing ministers and Christian workers that the gospel is not an established order, but rather a dynamic movement of God which makes "the contemporary situation of mankind and the world literally pregnant with the promise and the power of renewal in Christ."⁴⁶ The gospel, he continued,

[i]s a movement of the dynamic presence and activity of Jesus Christ in history to bring about in Himself a new humanity, a new creation, a movement, the marks of which in contemporary history we are called to discern and acknowledge, and in which we are called to participate, so that we become co-workers with Christ for the renewal of the world in Christ.⁴⁷

M.M. Thomas argued that no system of theology is adequate to define the relation between God, Christ and the Church.⁴⁸ The Christian minister cannot, therefore, settle in the comfort of a favoured theological system: "The minister of the gospel has to re-think, in every new situation, the relation of the Church and the world to each other in the context of the movement of God and His Kingdom. Faith involves an endless adventure of theological discernment and it is to this adventure that you are called."⁴⁹

The students considered Thomas's comments particularly relevant for Dalit theological discourse, affirming the interpretation of theology as a 'dynamic

⁴⁶ M.M. Thomas, "The Dynamics of the Kingdom in History", *New Creation in Christ*, 1976, p. 61

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 61-62

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 62

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

movement' as oppose to a 'stagnant reality'.⁵⁰ Thomas, one group added, was not merely concerned with 'translating' the gospel message, but rather 'constructing' theology relevant to the context of the people in their local situation.⁵¹ The students appreciated Thomas's endeavour to theologise within the creative tension of gospel and context, creating the optimistic possibility of change.⁵² A second small group positively affirmed Thomas's call to relate the gospel to the grass root context, commenting that Christian ministers must theologise not merely in 'theological surroundings', but where the people are in reality, incorporating the people's understanding of the Kingdom of God in the process of theological reflection and action.⁵³ This is significant, particularly given static traditional realities of caste system and *karma* which offers punishment to Dalits and little scope for liberation.⁵⁴ Here, the 'newness' offered in Christ breaks the concept of rigid determining structures, offering a new vision of reality and encouragement to participate in the struggle for liberation and transformation. Thomas's quest to relate Bible to context and context to Bible, not in absolute but dynamic terms relevant to the people, clearly remains significant for present day Dalit theologians. Although M.M. Thomas was not Dalit, and therefore could not theologise based on personal experience of Dalit context, his emphasis on context for shaping theological reflection and action cannot be overlooked.

Concluding his sermon, Thomas cautions the graduating students against betraying their Christian calling by becoming priests of an 'ethnic cult':

Many of the depth studies on the Indian churches...give the impression that the ministers of the Church tend to settle down as priests of an exclusive caste or class religion, propagating a sectarian God who protects the traditional interests of a closed group, entrenched in the traditional order, with little of the message of judgement, redemption or promise for the future.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Small group reflections.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Esther and Miriam

⁵⁵ M.M. Thomas, "The Cross and the Kingdom of God", p. 69

Affirming Thomas's reference to caste division within the Church,⁵⁶ the first small group strongly affirmed Thomas's caution, commenting that this moved him 'one step ahead' of his contemporary theologians.⁵⁷ Agreeing with Thomas, the students affirmed that Christianity must 'transcend all barriers of caste system' in order to achieve true Christian community.⁵⁸ The group asserted: "[h]e is very clear that he doesn't want a human society as understood by Caste system. He is against Brahminical society...his theology is again far beyond translation and [is for] construction, not in terms of Brahminical theology but as a counter to Brahminical theology."⁵⁹ This is an acute point which stands diametrically opposed to Bishop Azariah's assessment of Thomas as a Brahminic theologian. Indeed Azariah's categorisation of Thomas as a Brahminical thinker was used as a key point for dismissing Thomas's theology. The position taken by the students thus suggests a shift in second generation Dalit reflections on the theology of M.M. Thomas. Locating Thomas as a 'counter theologian' clearly reflects a student affinity for Thomas in the struggle against hegemonic Brahminical theology, further supporting the thesis that Thomas remains significant for Dalit theological discourse today.

2.3. Humanisation

The concept of humanisation has been identified as a central theme within Thomas's theology. In his third sermon, M.M. Thomas's emphasised that renewal of the world in Christ has direct relevance for the Church's solidarity with the world, and in particular concern for the victims of oppression and exploitation. He writes:

[t]here can be no realisation of God and salvation of the life of the mission of the Church except in full solidarity with the world, with men in their struggles and achievements and hopes and frustrations...The Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches did eminently right in stressing that everything which the Church is and does should be seen within the context of what God is and does through Christ to renew the world around, and within

⁵⁶ Thomas bemoaned, "alas, today the Church is often more caste-ridden than societies outside." *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁵⁷ Small group reflections.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the setting of the Church's solidarity with the world...No style of life is Christian, adds the relevant Uppsala report, 'if it is indifferent to the suffering of other people, in the victims of war and exploitation, in hungry children, in the prostitute seeking to be respected as a person, in the young man thirsting for knowledge – in all these we meet Jesus Christ... Whether we are rich or poor, it is in solidarity with the underprivileged that our existence acquires direction and purpose'.⁶⁰

Humanisation thus becomes possible only through the gospel of the Crucified and Risen Christ which provides the 'theological inwardness' of the modern human quest for true humanity.⁶¹ Thomas urges Christian ministers to measure their ministry not in terms of the quantity of religious activity, or secular service activities, but rather "by the theological enlightenment and spiritual inwardness you give to the world to realise its true being as servant of men's humanity."⁶²

The students were asked to discuss Thomas's theological reflections on humanisation. In reference to Bishop Azariah's comment that Thomas, as a Brahminical thinker, excluded Dalits from his theological reflections upon the concept of humanisation, the students were asked to make their assessment. Significantly, all three small groups agreed that Thomas *included* Dalits in his theological reflections. Once again the student observation stands diametrically opposed to Azariah's dismissal of Thomas. Two small groups further commented that in bringing the concept of humanisation into the fore of theological enquiry in India, M.M. Thomas 'offered a platform for liberation theology in India'.⁶³ Indeed, in this regard Thomas was judged to have laid a theological platform on which Dalit theology could effectively be built.⁶⁴ Recognition of Thomas in such strong terms suggests a significant shift in the way second generation Dalit theologians view Thomas's theological contribution, opening the path for further critical engagement within contemporary Dalit theological discourse.

⁶⁰ M.M. Thomas, "The Cross and the Kingdom of God", pp. 63-65

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 65

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁶³ Small group reflections.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

While appreciating Thomas's contribution, however, two cautions were raised. Although Thomas did not exclude Dalits from his theological reflections, one small group noted that there was 'no exclusive space in his theology for Dalits.'⁶⁵ In one sense this raises an important question as to whether theological space should be exclusive to any group, including Dalits. That M.M. Thomas had no exclusive space in his theology for Dalits reflects the fact that he sought to move away from such notions of exclusivity. The use of the term 'exclusive' by the students reflects, perhaps, the demand for methodological exclusivism by first generation Dalit theologians. Yet the point made by the students is concerned primarily with the fact that Thomas was not Dalit, and was not therefore able to understand the reality of existential Dalit pathos. They commented:

We feel that M.M. Thomas has made attempts to include the humanisation of Dalit...but the fact that he is not a Dalit has kept him from really getting into that...Here we would like to mention about Dalit experience...this is very definitely missing in Dr. Thomas's sermons...The [group] is in consensus to say that we need not say M.M. Thomas is not relevant, his theological framework has the platform, but then he didn't reach the point he has to reach.⁶⁶

The group added that while Thomas 'could not be blamed' for failing to relate the concept of humanisation specifically to Dalit reality, there was a need to build upon his position in order to adequately articulate the Dalit experience of dehumanisation.⁶⁷ The experience of pathos and oppression was considered a necessary component of theological deliberation, incorporating essential new insights into the realm of theology and praxis. While Thomas sought a theology 'challengingly relevant' to the people in the midst of their varied struggles within the caste-class-power nexus of Indian context, he was not Dalit, and did not theologise through the lens of pathos experience, reflecting once again an epistemological point of departure between Thomas and Dalit theologians.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

The second cautionary note questioned the significance of ‘inclusion’ of Dalits without effective *power* to participate. Acknowledging that M.M. Thomas included Dalits in his theological reflections on humanisation, the group observed:

What about empowerment? Because there is no point in including the Dalits – they cannot be included unless or otherwise they are empowered, because they are socially outcaste and living at a much lower level. They cannot be classed as equal. They cannot be included unless they are otherwise empowered, socially, culturally, economically and politically.⁶⁸

This is certainly a legitimate concern. In this research Thomas’s concern for the empowerment of the oppressed in terms of self-identity and consciousness has been noted. Urging that the people be empowered in order to effectively participate in the decision making process of power structures in India, Thomas argues:

[t]he fundamental rights of the citizen require that all traditional communities change, breaking traditional hierarchies and patriarchies, to bring about social justice by giving the dalits, the tribals and the women who were excluded from the traditional power-structures of society, fuller participation in the power-structures; and the State is called upon to assist in it by suitable legislations and other means.⁶⁹

M.M. Thomas’s theological concern for humanisation essentially included empowerment and active participation in the struggle for transformation against traditional hierarchies and patriarchies. Being and becoming human, for Thomas, encompassed spiritual, physical and material dimensions of life, including qualities of freedom, creativity, equality, power and responsibility for life in community. There is clear resonance here in the position of M.M. Thomas and the student’s concern for Dalit empowerment.

2.4. Sinned-Against

The students were asked to assess the validity of the term ‘sinned-against’ for Dalit theological discourse, in response to Bishop Azariah and Devasahayam’s

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ M.M. Thomas, “Meaning of Being a Secular State”, *The Church’s Mission and Post-Modern Humanism*, Delhi: ISPCK & Tiruvalla: CSS, 1996, p. 28

affirmation of this term to describe the Dalit condition. Each group reported that the concept 'sinned-against' was a valid theological category for Dalit theological discourse, although not to be accepted without caution. Speaking in favour of the concept, one student observed: "In order to challenge the existing system we ought to say we are not the sinner but the sinned-against. It will definitely help in the struggle for liberation against the [karma] theory that you are suffering for what you have done."⁷⁰ During personal interview, Hosea echoed the view of Azariah and Devasahayam, commenting:

I would say [sinned-against] is a suitable starting point, because the Dalits were considered a sin community – because of their sins they are suffering. They have to suffer passively and accept their suffering because of what they have done in the previous generation...And so in order to attain *moksha* or deliverance you have to undergo sufferings in this generation...So sinned community is the definition which is given by the Brahminical structure, which make them feel we are the sinned community. But I would say sinned-against in the Christian theology context, they are not the sinned community but they are the sinned-against community. Because they are not what they are because of what they have done, they are what they are because of what someone else has done...That is the greatest sin committed by the Brahminical caste structure, to say you are a sinner. Whereas looking at it from a Christian perspective, Christian theology is a liberative theology. Looking from this perspective I would say this would be a beautiful category to begin with, a suitable category, as sinned-against and not sinner.⁷¹

On a cautionary note, however, one small group commented that although the concept of sinned-against was appropriate for Dalit theology, it could not be interpreted 'monolithically'.⁷² If sin is interpreted in corporate terms, they added, the concept of sinned-against becomes appropriate. Interpreted in individual terms, however, the students argued that "an individual sinner is subjected to the Grace of God and redemption of Christ."⁷³ The distinction between corporate and individual is significant. In collective terms, Dalits may be considered sinned-against, yet as

⁷⁰ Small group reflections.

⁷¹ Interview; Hosea

⁷² Small group reflections.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

individuals Dalits fall under the redemptive Grace of God as a result of sin. One group further added: “There is also the danger of oppressed becoming oppressor when individual is neglected...It is not that when we say sinned-against that we...underplay the sins which we ourselves commit”.⁷⁴

These observations provide a significant caution against the lop-sided theological interpretation of sin posited by first generation Dalit theologians. In the previous chapter we noted that although Bishop Devasahayam and Bishop Azariah affirmed the reality of Dalit sin, the overwhelming emphasis in their writing is of Dalits as sinned-against. The student caution reflects a further significant point of theological resonance with M.M. Thomas in seeking to redress a lop-sided interpretation of sin. Certainly Thomas urged for a corporate understanding of sin and was conscious that corporate sin had direct consequences for the lives of innocent victims. Yet this position did not preclude Thomas from a universal understanding of human sin. All are sinful, standing under the Cross of Christ in judgement and forgiveness. This is pivotal in Thomas’s theology, for it is at the Cross that humanity essentially finds solidarity as forgiven sinners through the Grace of God.

A second small group added a further note of caution to the concept of sinned-against. While accepting the theological relevance of this category, observing that Jesus Christ himself was sinned-against, the students questioned whether this meant that Dalits were once again excluded from the realm of salvation:⁷⁵

As a group we did agree that Dalits can be categorised as sinned-against...But if Christ is seen as a redeemer, as such, then what about those people who are sinning? If we are the sinned-against, then what about the sinners? If Christ is coming as the Saviour of the sinners, then is Christ taking the side of the oppressors? If Christ is going to come down to save the sinners, and we are the sinned-against, then obviously the sinners are the ones who are inflicting us, so is Christ taking the side of the sinners?⁷⁶

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

This point met with full group consensus. The concept of sinned-against, while valid, could not therefore be accepted uncritically. Certainly M.M. Thomas offers a significant caution against a lopsided understanding of sin, holding individual sin in necessary tension with corporate sin. In doing so he is able to emphasise the individual tendency to self-righteousness *without* discounting the reality of victimisation resulting from corporate sin. Thomas's cautionary note was supported by the majority of the students.

Esther and Miriam affirmed the concept of sinned-against for Dalit theological reflection, but raised a key point based upon the reality of gender hierarchy within the Dalit community. They commented: "Yes the idea of sinned-against [is valid]. But the women are also sinned-against from within the [Dalit] community."⁷⁷ This comment highlights the problematic nature of interpreting sin within a framework of methodological polarity. As noted in Chapter V, Dalit Christian theology interprets sin within a methodological framework of bipolarity, asserting that non-Dalits Caste Indians are 'sinners' and Dalits the 'sinned-against'. While the theological concept of sinned-against is considered valid, the methodological framework within which this concept is interpreted may be legitimately challenged. During personal interview, Esther and Miriam expanded their concern further:

The Dalits can accept the sinned against concept, but when coming to Dalit women they [Dalit men] won't say we are all sinned against. They will see hierarchy there. They can't treat Dalit men and women equally. Both are oppressed by others, but while coming to them they will show the hierarchy in any situation, in local elections and all, they won't allow the Dalit women... They are both sinned against but there will be hierarchy. Dalit women are four times oppressed, Dalit men three times oppressed.⁷⁸

N.G. Prasuna writes: "Dalit men hate Manu's Law, but in the case of their own women they follow the principles of Manudharama Sastra."⁷⁹ In other words, while

⁷⁷ Small group reflections.

⁷⁸ Interview; Esther and Miriam. Four times oppressed reflects the position of Dalit women in terms of caste, class, gender, and religion.

⁷⁹ N.G. Prasuna, "The Dalit Woman", V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 103

rejecting the hierarchy imposed on them by the caste system, Dalit men are content to accept such hierarchy in relation to the Dalit women. M. Kamal Raja Selvi makes a similar observation:

There is an adage in Tamil, ‘You can wake a sleeping man but not a man who is already awake’. It is a fact. Men are aware of the high status of women. But they are equally aware that by recognizing their counterpart’s equality, along with themselves, they will lose the privileges they enjoy, at home with their easy-going life, their ordering about their wives etc. So they have to maintain the myth of male domination.⁸⁰

The issue of patriarchy is not of course limited to Dalit women. Reflecting on the Indian context, Dr. Ambedkar described the Hindu caste system as, “a pyramid of earthenware pots set upon one another. Not only are Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top and Shudras and the Untouchables at the bottom, but within each earthenware pot, men are at the top and women of that caste are at the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women.”⁸¹ While women face a common struggle against patriarchy, however, Prasuna, Gnanadason and Selvi emphasise that the experience of Dalit women significantly differs from other women.⁸² Dalit Christian women face the threefold discrimination of gender, class and caste.⁸³ This differentiates Dalit women from other women, and also, essentially, from Dalit men.

The issue of gender highlights the inadequacy of first generation Dalit theological methodology, for the gender question effectively creates a *new*

⁸⁰ M. Kamal Raja Selvi, “The Dalit Woman – The Fourth Class Citizen”, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996, p. 118

⁸¹ Dr. Ambedkar, quoted in Aruna Gnanadason, “Dalit Women – The Dalit of the Dalit”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalits Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998, p. 169

⁸² N.G. Prasuna, “The Dalit Woman”; M. Kamal Raja Selvi, “The Dalit Woman – The Fourth Class Citizen”; Aruna Gnanadason, “Dalit Women – The Dalit of the Dalit”.

⁸³ Ruth Manorama, “Statement by Women’s Voice and National Federation of Dalit Women”, 1999, http://www.aworc.org/bpfa/gov/escap/wv_nfdw.html. That Dalit women are considered the ‘Dalits of the Dalits’ is widely accepted in Dalit theological scholarship. See, for example, V. Devasahayam, ed. *Dalits and Women: Quest for Humanity*, Madras: The Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1992; V. Devasahayam, ed. *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1996; James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalits Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1998; John C.B. Webster, et al., *From Role to Identity: Dalit Christian Women in Transition*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997; Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, “Towards Theologizing in the Indian Context: A Woman’s Perspective”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December, 1997, p. 126

dichotomy. In this new dichotomy, Dalit women are the oppressed and Dalit men the oppressor. Theologically the Dalit men may be interpreted as the 'sinners', and the Dalit women the 'sinned-against'. This has significant implications concerning the Dalit concept of God's 'direct option' for the sinned-against, for in this new dichotomy Dalit men would be excluded from God's option on the basis of their subordination of Dalit women. This serves to highlight the problematic nature of a Dalit methodological framework which creates rigid dichotomies in order to theologise. Accepting the caution of western feminist Rosemary Reuther, who urged Christian women to 'avoid the trap' of claiming 'false innocence',⁸⁴ this methodological framework is open to criticism and inadequate as a framework for theological reflection on the concept of sin.

M.M. Thomas goes some way to redressing the inadequacy of Dalit methodology at this point. Significantly, Thomas's universal understanding of sin *does not preclude* the legitimacy of 'sinned-against' as a theological category. This concept cannot stand alone, however, existing within Thomas's broader conceptual understanding of sin. While the concept of universal sin itself requires context and gender specific critique and theological discernment,⁸⁵ Thomas does not dilute the reality of sin. The words of S. Arokiasamy are relevant here: "Our preaching on sin, which is part of the proclamation of the Gospel, must reckon with the fact that human persons are both subjects and objects of sin."⁸⁶

Bishop Devasahayam and Azariah, while accepting the reality of sin in the lives of Dalits, both limit this reality in order to emphasise that Dalits have historically been objects of sin. Bishop Azariah's assertion that Dalit sin is 'external', forged from outside as a result of the caste system, reinforces the assertion of Dalits as sinned-against. A dichotomous methodology allowed first generation Dalit theologians to assert this emphasis with greater political suasion. Yet, as the students demonstrate, this position remains open to critical *theological* challenge. M.M. Thomas provides an essential caution against interpreting sin in

⁸⁴ Mary Grey, "Falling into Freedom: Searching for New Interpretations of Sin in a Secular Society", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 47, No. 2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, p. 232

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ S. Arokiasamy, "Sinful Structures in the Theology of Sin", S. Arokiasamy & G. Gispert-Sauch, eds. *Liberation in Asia: Theological Perspectives*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1987, p. 112

rigid methodological or theologically exclusive terms, making his theological contribution relevant to present day Dalit theological discourse.

One further reflection on sin emerged during a personal interview with Aaron, who questioned the importance Christianity placed on sin. Acknowledging the Cross as a sign of suffering and redemption from sin, Aaron asked how the Cross can be accepted as a sign of victory when their overwhelming experience is of suffering.⁸⁷ This question was particularly important in the context of Dalit belief in *karma*:

If you happen to take the karma theory, which [says] that your karma will decide your future. The Dalits are given one very ridiculous and bad message...that because of karma – because of sin in the previous birth they are suffering now. So when you see that the Cross – suffering as well as victory – the term sin is very much bound to that, so psychologically what they are thinking...it is because of their sin...Whatever definition we could see – because of their sin they are suffering. Is there no other way to come out of that cycle?⁸⁸

While affirming in faith the victory of the Cross over sin, Aaron observes that the very symbol of the Cross is ‘bound’ in the reality of sin. In other words, whether Dalits accept the concept of *karma* or the Christian message of the Cross, both emphasise Dalit sin. While Christian Dalits have hope of victory over sin through the Cross in the midst of suffering Aaron questioned the need to emphasise the reality of sin in the context of suffering. Here the comments of John C.B. Webster are worth noting:

It ought to be frankly recognised that it may be towards the Motherhood of the Church, rather than towards the Fatherhood of the Saviour from sin, that the faces of the Paraiyars and aboriginal races of India are slowly being turned. They may be seeking baptism, for the most part, not from a desire to have their lives and consciences cleansed from sin and to enter into the eternal life of God, but because the church presents itself as a refuge from oppression, and as a power that fosters hope and makes for betterment.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Interview; Aaron

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ John C.B. Webster, quoted in, Andrew Wingate, *The Church and Conversion*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, p. 19

Certainly Thomas did not want to dilute the reality of sin, yet neither did he view Christian salvation as an ‘either-or’ option as suggested by Webster, emphasising the integral relation between salvation and humanisation. He did not view salvation as an option between freedom from sin for eternal life or refuge from oppression within the world. Rather, he viewed sin and redemption as integrally related to the Cross of Christ. Thus, redemption from sin in Christ has necessary implications for the process of humanisation, including freedom from oppression and the struggle against oppressive forces within the world. It is within the tension between salvation and humanisation that M.M. Thomas’s theology becomes, and remains, significant for Dalit theological discourse.

3. Reflections from Personal Interviews

Following the larger group meeting, personal interviews were conducted with the students.⁹⁰ During the interviews, I asked the students to reflect upon the challenges facing Dalit theology after twenty five years. This provided a platform for further discussion on the relevance of M.M. Thomas’s theology for contemporary Dalit theological discourse.

3.1. Exclusivity

During interview, Samuel noted a concern over the issue of Dalit theological exclusivity. It has already been acknowledged that Dalit theology emerged as a theology “*of the Dalits, by the Dalits, for the Dalits.*”⁹¹ Challenging this notion, Samuel commented:

One of the dangers I personally feel is that Dalit theology is very exclusive, in the sense that many Dalit theologians do not recognise other theologians...because they say they lack Dalit

⁹⁰ Esther and Miriam were interviewed together for reasons of cultural sensitivity.

⁹¹ M.E. Prabhakar, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology”, James Massey, ed. *Indigenous People: Dalit Issues in Today’s Theological Debate*, p. 210

experience. Of course they lack the Dalit experience, but they have the heart and mind to fight for the people.⁹²

There must be a place, he added, where theologians interested in the struggles of the people can be accommodated. The exclusive attitude adopted within Dalit theological circles effectively excludes non-Dalits from contributing to the Dalit struggle. While accepting there may be a legitimate ‘fear’ when including the voice of non-Dalits, warranting the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion, Samuel believed that some space should be provided for such input.

Samuel went on to affirm the importance of including M.M. Thomas in Dalit theological discourse, in particular his theological reflections upon love, equality and humanisation.⁹³ On a cautionary note, however, Samuel observed that Thomas’s theology was framed at an intellectual level, far removed from the reality of the people:

He [Thomas] perceives it at an intellectual level...Does it come to the ground where we are? That’s where the difficulty is...Because M.M. Thomas comes from a different community and his experience with Dalits is very limited. And his church is very much caste church, so he can’t come forward beyond his limitations...Though he has radically changed several things, but on the ground the reality is very different.⁹⁴

This is a significant observation which urges that theology be rooted in the ground reality of the people. It is important to note, however, that Samuel extended his caution to include Dalit theologians:

[Dalit theologians are] sitting in air conditioned rooms, or in highly intellectual places. It has become a business for some people...And the ground reality is entirely different. Still people are in poverty. Still people are experiencing all these Dalit difficulties in rural places...[Dalit theologians] go to international conferences, or write something and sit in a place, but they don’t come to ground level where they can work, organize, reconcile – take the movement forward.⁹⁵

⁹² Interview, Samuel

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

This point was echoed by Isaac, who was also frustrated by the gap between theology and the ground reality.⁹⁶ This frustration resonates with Godwin Shiri, director of CISRS, who argues that “the alienation of elite Dalits from the people is a great obstacle for the development of Dalit struggles for liberation.”⁹⁷ Certainly Thomas sought a theology challengingly relevant to the people in the midst of their varied struggles within the caste-class-power nexus of Indian context. This has been the goal also for Dalit theologians in a bid to bring the reality of Dalit pathos into the heart of praxis discourse. If Dalit theology is to legitimately remain a people’s movement, then the separation between elite theologians and the people must be bridged. Thus, while Samuel’s caution against Thomas as an elite theologian is critical, so too does it remain relevant for Dalit theologians today.

3.2. Identity

Discussing the challenges facing Dalit theology, the issue of identity was acknowledged by the students as critical. Two aspects in particular are noted: 1) the reality of division within and between Dalit communities; 2) the tension between ‘Christian’ and ‘Dalit’ identity.

3.2.1. Dalit division

Mention has already been made of division resulting from gender, as well as division resulting from the reality of hierarchy among Dalit communities. Agreeing with Fr Arul Raja that Dalits always seek to know ‘who is beneath them’, Solomon observed that prejudice and division existed among Dalit theologians based upon caste hierarchy within the outcaste community.⁹⁸ Although Elijah affirmed the emergence of Dalit theology for providing a sense of Dalit self-identity, he added that the reality of division within the Dalit communities, including those within the Church, remained a source of challenge.⁹⁹ Elijah observed that whenever a Dalit

⁹⁶ Interview: Isaac

⁹⁷ Godwin Shiri, “People’s Movement: An Introspection as We Enter the 21st Century”, *Religion and Society*, Vol. 43, No. 1&2, March & June, 1996, p. 125

⁹⁸ Interview; Solomon

⁹⁹ Interview: Elijah

makes a comment, the first question asked by other Dalits is ‘which Dalit’, in order to ascertain the credibility of the source.¹⁰⁰ He further added: “People are asserting their [Dalit] identities, and based on their assertions the Church is dividing. This is another [side of the] coin of Dalit Christian theology.”¹⁰¹ Identity thus becomes a defining factor in distinguishing ‘self’ from ‘other’, determining who is included and who is excluded within a given categorisation of people. Certainly Dalit theology has sought to embrace a vision of unity based upon the theological assertion of Jesus’ identification with ‘the least of these’. Yet within a methodological paradigm which asserts Dalit identity as against non-Dalit identity, or indeed asserts ‘higher’ Dalit to ‘lower’ Dalit identity, the resulting division works against the very concept of unity envisioned within Dalit theology.

3.2.2. Dalit Christian identity

In regard to the issue of ‘Dalit’ and ‘Christian’ identity, Elijah questioned whether Dalit Christians are to be identified as Dalit, Dalit Christian, or Christian.¹⁰² Many of the students acknowledged ‘Christian’ identity as the essential transformative identity. Esther and Miriam, Amos, Isaac, Hosea, and Elijah all made specific reference to the transformation that had taken place within their family since converting to Christianity. For example, Elijah reflected:

My parents, even though they are from Dalit background, because of the missionaries...that was the beginning of transformation in their lives, when the change began...My saying that is a major transformation – Christ played a major role. Their fathers have struggled under caste society...my grandma used to tell me that if they wanted to cross the colony, they used to carry some things – they used to carry a broom and this and that...But after experiencing Christ as their Lord...there was a lot of change in their social life, in their spiritual life, even in their hope. Previously in their context they were nowhere, no people, people of no hope. But after becoming children of Christ, they are people of hope.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Esther commented: “I am a Dalit woman converted from Hinduism. I came to Christianity...now I am preaching in the Church and I am continuing my work, but in Hinduism I cannot raise my voice at all.”¹⁰⁴ Christian identity was thus considered essential for renewal and transformation.

In his book, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion*, Samuel Jayakumar argues that Dalit liberation theologians are misguided in suggesting Dalit identity had precedence over Christian identity in shaping the rise of self-worth and identity among the Dalits. He argues:

The identity of the depressed class Christians was shaped by their claim to a relationship with Christ as co-believers. A person first of all has to assert himself or herself, his or her human worth, before that person can resist the oppressors...[A]ccepting the Gospel of Christ gave such self-worth and identity to the poor and the oppressed classes.”¹⁰⁵

Jayakumar further notes that the term ‘Dalit’ has become so stigmatised that it is now understood as a substitute for the term ‘Harijan’, providing “no escape from oppression and atrocities”.¹⁰⁶

Yet it is clear that ‘Dalit’ identity was also considered by the students to be significant:

Dalit Christian theology has created a lot of awareness even in theological circles. Thirty years ago even the Christians to assert their identity as Dalit, it was like a shaming incident. People, even my parents were Dalits, but today because of Dalit theology I am claiming that I am a Dalit. Dalit theology has given me an assertive identity. People may say a thousand words, a thousand things against me, but as I said, I am a Dalit – I am proud to be a Dalit.¹⁰⁷

Isaiah commented that the true problem in India for Dalits is not caste but the caste system.¹⁰⁸ Amos agreed, observing that caste is essential to break the caste

¹⁰⁴ Interview; Esther

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Jayakumar, *Dalit Consciousness and Christian Conversion: Historical Resources for a Contemporary Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1999, p. 16

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15

¹⁰⁷ Interview; Elijah

¹⁰⁸ Interview; Isaiah

system.¹⁰⁹ The pride of Dalit identity is crucial, he added, for bringing Dalits together in solidarity, striking ‘fear’ into the heart of the caste system.¹¹⁰

During a conversation with the editor of *Dalit Voice*, V.T Rajshekar informed me that the Dalit goal was to escape the ‘tyranny of Hinduism’ through means of religious conversion.¹¹¹ This conversion could be to any other religion, based on the premise that ‘if the building was on fire you would want to leave via any exit’.¹¹² Reflecting on Rajshekar’s comment during personal interview, Amos confessed his struggle concerning the issue of Dalit Christian identity. Describing himself as an ‘evangelical Christian’, he informed me of his struggle to understand what this meant for his relationship with Dalit Buddhist friends, a struggle which serves to highlight the complexity of the identity question.

The use of exclusive Dalit identity set within a polarising methodological framework, however, leads to inadequate theological reflection which stands against the ultimate Dalit theological vision of reconciled and transformed Indian society. For example, Hosea gives primacy to his Dalit identity, which leads him to theologise from a position of exclusivity similar to that of first generation Dalit theologians. Commenting on the reality of separation between the caste village and the Dalit colony, Hosea observes:

Things are changing drastically within three generations within my own eyes. My mother was a Hindu convert – had I been with my mother in the same community I could never become a religious leader, because I belong to the untouchable community. I would otherwise say a community *which is not fit to touch us*, because it was a divided community and we did not think about division. So I would say *it was better that they did not touch us so we were pure*, not being polluted by their idea of division. It is high time we look at ourselves not as untouchables, but *we would say that we are so high that they were not fit to touch us...*I would say that the caste people lived outside the colony!¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Interview; Amos

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Conversation with V.T. Rajshekar, UTC, 14th October, 2004.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Interview; Hosea. Emphasis added.

The passion of Hosea during the interview was certainly captivating, yet the polarising tendency to affirm Dalits at the expense of non-Dalits is clearly evident. Reversing historical reality, Hosea posits the Dalits as the ones 'so high' that they were 'not fit to be touched' by the caste villagers. This reversal sets Dalits as the 'pure' and the non-Dalits as the 'impure'.

Helpful to our discussion at this point are the observations of Sathianathan Clarke, in particular his assessment of the 'self-other' dichotomy established when Dalits seek to create a counter-theology or counter culture. Clarke writes:

[i]t may be pertinent to problematize the much celebrated move of positing Dalit religions and culture as 'counter religion,' and 'counterculture.' The terms themselves sound remarkably impressive and striking. In Christian circles, it is very much influenced by the urge to find continuity with the prophetic strands of anti-*status quo* movements. While this resistive and oppositional tack of Dalit religion and culture cannot be overlooked and undervalued, one must be careful not to construct the culture and religion of Dalits as essentially characterized by the prefix 'counter,' as if its whole nature can be captured in its reaction to something that is a primordial given, such as caste Hindu religion and culture. The problem with this approach is that it reinforces the Self-Other dichotomy. This sets up caste culture as the Self and then interprets Dalit culture as the Other which actualizes itself through responding and reacting to the primary reality of the former.¹¹⁴

Clarke rejects a bipolar method which defines itself as a counter-identity, for it depends upon the presupposition of a "comprehensive system which exhibits a dialectic polarity between moral/virtuous and immoral/base."¹¹⁵ If this bipolarity is accepted, he argues, Dalit religion is posited along the virtuous axis, while Caste religion is located along the axis of deprivation and exploitation.¹¹⁶ Such polarity fails to recognise the "numerous ways in which these two communities interact economically, socially and politically... Any easy dialectical model undermines the

¹¹⁴ Sathianathan Clarke, "Subaltern Culture as Resource for People's Liberation: A Critical Inquiry into Dalit Culture Theory", *Religion and Society*, Vol. 44, No. 4, December, 1997, pp. 91-2

¹¹⁵ Sathianathan Clarke, "Dalit Religion as a Resourceful Symbolic Domain: A Critical Review of Theories of Religion and a Constructive Proposition to Glean the Richness of Dalit Subjectivity", *Religion and Society*, Vol. 49, Nos. 2&3, June & September, 2004, p. 30

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36

subtlety and intricacy of the interrelationship.”¹¹⁷ To indulge in a simple reversal of a bipolarity of human religious expression along communal lines, he adds, is ‘erroneous and groundless’.¹¹⁸ Clarke’s comments provide a valid and necessary caution against the Dalit tendency to theologise within a rigid methodological framework of bipolarity.

The majority of the students did not go as far as Hosea in echoing the methodology of first generation Dalit theologians. While all affirmed the essential nature of Dalit identity, students continued to wrestle with the most appropriate strategy for contemporary Dalit theology. Grateful as he was to Bishop Azariah for leading Dalit theology into a ‘golden age’ of identity consciousness, Isaiah was challenged to move beyond a narrow focus on Dalit concerns, commenting: “One of my friends said recently, ‘I don’t believe in speaking about Dalit. If I say I am going for Dalit it won’t help any...because it will demonstrate partiality for one community. Rather I won’t say it but I will do it’...That gave me a great challenge, not to speak about it but to do it.”¹¹⁹ Here, the desire is not to leave Dalit concerns behind, for these continue to shape Isaiah’s identity as a Christian minister, but rather to move beyond the focus on Dalit identity in order to avoid demonstrating partiality to one community over another. This position is in part shaped by Isaiah’s own experience as a Dalit. During his upbringing Isaiah commented that he did not know he was a Dalit. Indeed this identity only became clear when he entered into Christian ministry. Growing up, he said,

I never had the Dalit problem...we had a nice society where everybody lives together, and after I entered into the ministry then I came to know the problems are there...I can say that, in one sense, though it is visible in the Church for their identity crisis, generally people are very good in one sense. I studied under non-Dalits – they loved me so much, they loved me so much...I never thought that I am Dalit and they are [not]¹²⁰ – they never behaved like that.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39

¹¹⁹ Interview; Isaiah

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

Jacob, influenced by the love of non-Dalit family members, also wrestled with the concept of identity. Jacob's father was Dalit and his mother was a high caste Hindu convert to Christianity. Raised by his Grandparents on his mother's side, he commented: "My aunts and Uncles were very good people. Though I heard a lot of things against the high caste people, I could never materialize those in my mind."¹²² The question of Dalit identity became a challenge for Jacob during his student years, in particular during this theological training at UTC. He reflected:

I was wandering in my first year, should I say yes I am Dalit and proclaim it to the world and fight for my people, or can I be a common person and then also fight for my people?...In the Church context it is not easy. At theological college I can say I am a Dalit, but if I say the same thing in my Church most of them are not happy. My mother is not happy....she says, you have that interest in issues – fine, you can do all those things, but why do you want to assert yourself as this thing and that thing. Let us not say we are this and we are that...let nobody say that they are from this background, that background. Let everybody be equal.¹²³

Neither Isaiah nor Jacob deny the need for a continued struggle on behalf of the Dalits, but question the most effective strategy to be adopted in that struggle as Christian ministers.

3.2.3. M.M. Thomas and Dalit Christian identity

Significantly, M.M. Thomas was conscious of the tension regarding the concept of Dalit Christian identity in India. Indeed, given the historical and contemporary reality of caste inequality and oppression, Thomas admitted that caste-communal consciousness *may be necessary* as a 'short term' strategy for the Dalits. Thomas acknowledged that the "depressed classes are finding their caste solidarity and consciousness of caste-selfhood a weapon in the fight against caste oppression and for greater equality of opportunities in State and society."¹²⁴ M.M. Thomas here supports M.N. Srinivas, who argued that 'outcaste-consciousness' had emerged in

¹²² Interview; Jacob

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ M.M. Thomas, "Revival of Caste Consciousness", *National Christian Council Review*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 11, November, 1958, p. 477

order to safeguard constitutional rights within the Church of South India, demanding due representation on Church councils and other Church bodies.¹²⁵ Thomas, significantly, acknowledges the legitimacy of this ‘counter-revolutionary caste-consciousness’.¹²⁶ While affirming that the tension may be eased by a ‘heart change’ in the ranks of the upper caste, he argues: “There are many occasions when caste oppression cannot be met except through depressed caste revolt.”¹²⁷ M.M. Thomas does not take lightly the reality of violence escalating from such revolt, or the danger of deepening caste-consciousness within the Church and the wider community. His conviction does, however, demonstrate Thomas’s ardent rejection of the caste system, and an affirmation of the short term benefit of Dalit identity in the struggle for humanisation.

Ultimately, however, Thomas urges that the Church move towards a position of witness within India’s search for a casteless pattern of society. He writes:

The Church will have to involve itself more seriously than ever in the fight against casteism within the Church both as a worshipping community and as a social group. Is it not time for the Church to see that no recognition is given to caste at any point in the religious life of the Church, in worship and sacraments, prayer meetings and other functions?¹²⁸

M.M. Thomas acknowledges that the Church will have to “engage in a ministry of reconciliation of the most difficult kind” in order for this vision to be successful.¹²⁹ His is not a utopian vision which fails to acknowledge the reality of inequality in India. Rather, the reality of caste division demands participation of the people in the struggle for equality on the path towards reconciliation.

During personal interview, Joshua found resonance with Thomas’s theological emphasis on humanisation in Christ, moving beyond the division between ‘Brahmin and Dalit’.¹³⁰ The primary concern, he added, should be the

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 478

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 478

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 479

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ Interview; Joshua

people's struggles within the context of their daily living. Humanity thus becomes the defining identity, beyond 'Indianess' or 'Dalitness':

I go with M.M.'s humanisation – especially for the struggles of the people... When God created us it doesn't mean you belong to a certain community... He didn't put gradings or caste or anything when He has created human beings in His own image, so there is no difference, [we are] equal, neither male nor female... I want an identity where I can be identified, not as an Indian,... but as a co-person who is struggling for humanity. That is the most important thing.¹³¹

For Joshua, the contribution of Thomas in seeking to bring the concept of humanisation into the fore of theological debate within India remains relevant for Dalit theological discourse. Thomas, he suggested, was a 'true liberationist' who sought to relate theology to the heart of the people's struggle for equality and justice.¹³²

3.2.4. Christ and Dalit identity

The question of identity remains an ongoing challenge as Dalit theologians attempt to create a relevant Christology which maintains the integral link between Christian and non-Christian Dalits. Solomon recognises this continued challenge, asking: "Is Dalit theology a Christian theology or should there be a Dalit theology, where we do theology from Dalit resources?" He further asks: "Dalit theology must be Christo-centric, and if it is Christo-centric, how is it really relevant for Dalits – for non-Christian Dalits?"¹³³ This question recognises that not all Dalits are Christian, prompting the question whether there can be a Christian paradigm relevant for the liberation of both Christian and non-Christian Dalits, a significant goal for Dalit theologians.

This struggle is also apparent in Thomas, notes Solomon, although Thomas's concern was not restricted to Dalits. Indeed, Solomon suggested, Thomas sought to maintain the 'messianic uniqueness' of Christ in the midst of a modern Indian

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ Interview; Solomon

context witnessing the rise of renascent religious and secular ideological movements.¹³⁴ M.M. Thomas sought to relate theology to this wider context in order to make the Gospel challengingly relevant to the people. Solomon observed that Thomas's paradigm of Lordship of Christ over 'all things' allowed him to discern Christ in the wider religio-secular context of India, articulating a Christology of new humanity which bridged the gap between the Church and the world, Christians and non-Christians.¹³⁵ Within this paradigmatic framework, Thomas was able to bring humanisation into the fore of theological enquiry, positively engaging with new anthropological and ideological questions emerging in India. It is here that Solomon considered the theology of M.M. Thomas to be relevant to contemporary Dalit theological discourse, for Dalit theology readily seeks to engage with wider Dalit anthropological and ideological concerns in the pursuit of Dalit liberation.¹³⁶

Certainly M.M. Thomas's theology sought to incorporate all Indians, while Dalit theology has been exclusively concerned with Dalits. The collective identity of Dalits as historically 'outcaste' allowed Dalit theologians to postulate an exclusive, redemptive Dalit identity in Christ, a position which goes significantly beyond the universal understanding to sin and redemption found in Thomas. Indeed the concept of 'God's direct option for the Dalits', and Dalits as 'sinned-against', highlights this point of departure. Yet it is argued that Thomas's theological investigation concerning the relevance of Christ within the religio-secular context of India contributed to the emergence of Dalit Christian theology, and remains relevant for Dalit theological discourse today.

Jayahavan, a member of the Dalit Resource Centre in Madurai, Tamil Nadu observed that M.M. Thomas's greatest contribution was his attempt to shift theological discourse away from traditional notions of religious communalism to find Christ-centred meaning in the secular realm.¹³⁷ Thomas's search for a theology of true secular fellowship grounded in Christ sought to break the dichotomy between the sacred and the secular realm, both of which he interpreted within the Lordship of

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Conversation at United Theological College, 9th November, 2005

Christ. As noted in Chapter I, Dalit Christians do not possess the legal right to claim privileges granted to other Scheduled Caste Dalits. Indeed, Thomas supported the 1966 NCCI Narsapur Consultation, which asserted that conversion to Christianity is a “turning away from idols to Christ...not, moving from one culture to another, or from one community to another community as it is understood in the communal sense in India.”¹³⁸ This shift reduced the pressure upon Dalits to follow Christ though a path of conversion to the Christian community through Baptism, an issue which remains contentious and has socio-economic consequences.

M.M. Thomas’s theology took place in the tension of maintaining the centrality of Christ as the redeemer of the world within the midst of a context of religio-secular pluralism. Dalit theology takes place within the same tension, seeking to establish a theological paradigm which maintains the centrality of Christ while also affirming the essential relationship with Dalits of other religious and secular faith. While it is not suggested that M.M. Thomas’s theology can be uncritically transposed into the context of Dalit theology, it is argued that he offered significant theological signposts in the quest to maintain the centrality of Christ in the midst of religio-secular pluralism.

Discussing the thesis during an informal conversation, Solomon suggested that M.M. Thomas had not been acknowledged by Dalit theologians due to ‘political reasons’.¹³⁹ It was clear to Solomon that despite this failure to acknowledge Thomas, his theology had been a ‘significant influence’ on emerging Dalit theology.¹⁴⁰ Certainly Dalit attempts to develop a ‘counter theology’ in response to the Indian Christian theological tradition, of which Thomas was considered a part, influenced the radical methodology of emerging Dalit theology. Thus for *strategic* and *political* purposes no recognition of M.M. Thomas’s theology could be acknowledged.¹⁴¹ In other words, by adopting a dichotomous methodological framework in order to create a counter theology, first generation Dalit theologians dismissed the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas as opposed to and irrelevant for Dalit

¹³⁸ Quoted from the Narsapur Consultation of the NCCI, 1966. M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, Madras: CLS, 1971, p. 39

¹³⁹ Conversation; Solomon

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Interview; Solomon

theological discourse. Yet as the theology emanating from such a methodology comes under greater scrutiny from second generation Dalit theologians, the contribution of M.M. Thomas emerges as particularly relevant to contemporary Dalit theological discourse. Indeed, agreeing with Solomon, “we can say that M.M. Thomas did not really develop a Dalit theology as such, but that he gave a framework for developing our own Dalit theology.”¹⁴²

3.3. Forgiveness

During student interviews the concept of forgiveness became a prominent theme for discussion. During the full group meeting, one group had commented: “We have forgiven them [caste oppressors] for three thousand years, and what is going to be our response? Are we going to forgive again? How are we now going to respond to that?”¹⁴³ Reiterating this point, a second group added:

M.M. Thomas speaks about forgiveness. He talks about the need for everybody to forgive each other. But for me, for Dalits, for so many centuries we have been forgiving other people, but will they come forward and ask forgiveness from us? Is it possible for the communities to come forward to ask for forgiveness for so many generations? That is not possible – but they expect us to continue to forgive. That is a problem for me about M.M. Thomas.¹⁴⁴

Further reflection within the group discussion was limited, although the subject remained a source of contention during interviews.

Jacob questioned the notion that Dalits had historically forgiven the oppressors: “M.M. Thomas asks us to forgive – to forgive others. That’s fine. Some told us the other day that we have been forgiving for so long, for such a long time, how long shall we forgive? That has been asked. But what I feel is that we have not been forgiving – personally I feel that.”¹⁴⁵ He added that while the rhetoric of forgiveness is present in his home Church, in reality there is little evidence of true forgiveness leading to reconciled relationship within the Church. Rather, inter-group

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Small group reflections.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ Interview; Jacob

tensions remained, reinforced by both Dalits and non-Dalits.¹⁴⁶ In this context, Jacob asked, where is Dalit forgiveness evidenced?¹⁴⁷ This poses critical questions relating to the Dalit understanding of forgiveness in history, particularly in the context of resistance to, or internalised acceptance of, caste oppression. How forgiveness has been understood and indeed manifest within the Dalit Christian community is a valuable issue for further research beyond the limits of this thesis.

Samuel commented that caste Indians are not ready to take responsibility for the way they have historically oppressed the Dalits. Indeed, he added, injuries to Dalits are still being committed in various forms, including the denial of Dalit educational, economic or occupational opportunities.¹⁴⁸ He asks: “If there is no-one coming seeking repentance, then how can there be forgiveness?”

Of course forgiveness is a gracious one. God graciously forgives us. That I whole heartedly accept and I believe. But at the same time it should not be a cheap grace. Of course God is willing to forgive me, but I should feel it – I need His forgiveness – I need His acceptance. I have committed something wrong against Him so that I need His acceptance. So I should go forward and beg for that. Then only transformation takes place in me...how He has accepted me even though I am a sinner. If I don't realise all these things...and simply take it for granted, what is that?¹⁴⁹

Forgiveness and repentance are thus acknowledged as integrally connected. Without repentance there can be no forgiveness. Although Samuel accepts that forgiveness remains an essential component of Dalit theological discourse, it can not be considered a realistic option for Dalit Christians in a context where caste oppressors are unlikely to repent.

3.3.1. Forgiveness, Power and Dignity

The concept of forgiveness, Miriam suggested, is essential for Dalit theological discourse: “It is very powerful. It is very powerful. God has given Himself on the Cross when He came to forgive. He forgave all our sins. It is

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Interview; Samuel

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

something very important.”¹⁵⁰ This comment highlights two points; a recognition of sin and an affirmation of the Cross as the source of forgiveness of sins. The first point demonstrates that despite the degraded status of Dalit women, both within and beyond the Dalit community, Miriam claims no ‘false innocence’ for Dalit women.¹⁵¹ Recognition of the Cross as essential for the forgiveness of sin demonstrates a strong resonance with M.M. Thomas. Echoing the thoughts of Samuel, however, Esther commented that if a person doesn’t realise the wrong that has been committed, there can be no forgiveness:

Jesus was crucified and resurrected and he forgave everybody’s sins. So after that, if you do the sin it is not reasonable I think, because God [has] forgiven everybody’s sin but still it remains...the Lord Jesus said again I will come but there will be judgement – he will not forgive, he will judge each other...I am saying that if a person realises that he did wrong, to that person I will forgive. But the person who doesn’t realise the wrong things he did to me...I can’t forgive that – I can’t forgive...We are pastors, so we should forgive. God says forgive. But God also took a stick and He beat. He beat everybody because they went in the wrong way.¹⁵²

For Esther, there are times to forgive and times to withhold forgiveness depending upon the attitude and continued actions of the oppressor. Given the reality of continued gender oppression within the Church, where women remain ‘like slaves’, forgiveness thus becomes an unrealistic option and a great challenge for Dalit women.¹⁵³ Miriam added: “Looking at the Dalit women’s context, no-one will ask for forgiveness from us. They will just take it for granted.”¹⁵⁴ When I asked whom she meant by ‘they’, she responded:

Those who are oppressing us, because Dalit women are on the bottom level. No-one will recognise them. They just do what they want... You see many atrocities against Dalit women...they just do and they will move out. So in that condition what is this

¹⁵⁰ Interview; Esther & Miriam

¹⁵¹ See Mary Grey, “Falling into Freedom: Searching for New Interpretations of Sin in a Secular Society”, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 47, No. 2, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, p. 232.

¹⁵² Interview; Esther & Miriam

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

forgiveness you are talking about? The women they are not in the position to forgive.¹⁵⁵

The contribution of Esther and Miriam highlights the reality of powerlessness and indignity afforded Dalit women, even within the Church. While accepting the theological concept of forgiveness as a powerful source of renewal, they pose the critical challenge of relating theology to practice. Indeed, their voice essentially brings the issue of gender, power and dignity into the heart of theological discourse on forgiveness.

During interview, Joshua and I discussed the issue of power in relation to forgiveness. The context for our discussion was the incident in which Medical missionary Graeme Staines was killed with his two sons in Orissa, 1999. After this tragic incident, Gladys Staines forgave those found guilty of the crime. Joshua commented that as a foreign missionary Gladys Staines had been afforded high public profile, and that her choice to forgive therefore had a profound impact on the people of India.¹⁵⁶ The Dalits, he added, are not afforded such a profile and thus have little power to forgive:

You see people who have power have power to forgive...But people who don't have any power, what about them?...People for whom we don't care – if they forgive also we don't care. So what does forgiveness mean to them and what does forgiveness mean to the person who is being forgiven?¹⁵⁷

For forgiveness to be transformative, Joshua added, two things are required. First, there must be recognition of the need for forgiveness on the part of the guilty. Second, the person forgiven must affirm the dignity of the one forgiving.¹⁵⁸ In other words, if a person doesn't recognise the dignity of the victim, the forgiveness offered is rendered powerless. For Joshua, the question of power and human dignity become key questions relating to the Dalit discourse on forgiveness. The inequality and indignity of Dalits signify that the issue of forgiveness remains critically relevant for continued theological discourse.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ Interview; Joshua

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

3.3.2. Forgiveness, Justice and Transformation

Dr. James Massey informed me during an interview that forgiveness offers no ‘magic formula’ for transformation.¹⁵⁹ In a situation where the Dalit Christian movement has barely begun to effect change in the Church, Massey questioned how the message of forgiveness and reconciliation is preached from the pulpit. Is it simply a message of passive acceptance of a theological concept, or is a change demanded from both Dalits and non-Dalit Christians? There is a danger, he added, that a caste Bishop or Christian minister demanding forgiveness from the Dalits fails to recognise his own need for change. As a one-sided message forgiveness becomes a tool for further Dalit suppression and passivity resulting in little challenge to the Christian community as a whole and therefore to no genuine transformation.¹⁶⁰

Significantly, the theology of M.M. Thomas cautions against forgiveness being used as a tool to support the status quo of hierarchical and oppressive structures. He writes:

I know many people in my country...feel that this is a time when we should speak less of reconciliation and more of conflict, as the means of liberating the poor and the oppressed from unjust power-structures embedded in the status-quo. They are in one sense right. Ideas of reconciliation and forgiveness have been used, or rather abused, all through history as instruments of maintaining the status quo against necessary radical changes...The politics of justice are indeed a realm of necessary power-political struggles and conflicts, sometimes breaking into violence and requiring strategies of violence. This cannot be otherwise, if we take seriously the forces of corporate sin. The combination of power, ideology and religious sanctions supporting the oppressive systems against which the forces of justice have to struggle is very militant.¹⁶¹

Here, Thomas relates theology to justice, rejecting the use of forgiveness as an instrument in support of the status quo. Given the reality of corporate sin, Thomas highlights the need for a ‘politics of justice’ in order to overcome existing injustice

¹⁵⁹ Interview; Dr. James Massey

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ M.M. Thomas, “The Divine Forgiveness”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, Delhi: ISPK & Tiruvalla: CSS, 1994, p. 7

sanctioned by the power of religious and ideological sanction. To this end, Thomas's primary emphasis is the liberation of the poor and oppressed. Thomas does not discount the need for continued struggle in the process of renewal in Christ, but rather cautions against revolutionary movements becoming 'ruthless, betraying the human ends of justice'.¹⁶² Indeed Thomas argues that reconciliation in India is threatened by,

religious, cultural, caste and ethnic groups who have been traditionally powerful and who want to continue that tradition of lording it over others *or* from groups who have come to recognise the suppression of their self-identity in history by more powerful groups and tend in their struggle for justice to absolutize their self-identities to the point of segregating themselves from others.¹⁶³

While demanding continued challenge to hegemonic powers, Thomas cautions against traditionally oppressed groups becoming self-righteous as a result of absolute self-identity which reinforces enmity and division. He thus points to forgiveness in Christ as the *only* paradigm for ultimate renewal and transformation. Significantly, however, M.M. Thomas does not advocate a utopian paradigm of forgiveness based upon a naïve notion of human equality in India, but rather advocates forgiveness as the way of renewal in Christ *in the midst* of inequality and exploitation:

If the oppressor and the oppressed confront each other as a self-contained system of collective power versus self-righteous movement of collective revolt, politics remains an area of inevitable war and violence. But if they see themselves as locked in... 'single tragedy', and are prepared therefore to respond together in repentance to the offer of divine Forgiveness and Fellowship in Christ, "it breaks through the awful logic of human power- the endless chain of wrong, retribution and new wrong – and transmutes it, despite itself", giving events a new direction.¹⁶⁴

Thomas stresses the need for repentance in the process of forgiveness and reconciled fellowship in Christ. Transformation becomes possible in human relations because one first recognises the forgiveness offered in Christ. The power to forgive

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ M.M. Thomas, "Reconciled Diversity", *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, p. 70. Emphasis added.

¹⁶⁴ M.M. Thomas, quoted in T. Jacob Thomas, *Ethics of a world Community*, Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1993, p. 180

comes from the Crucified and Risen Christ, which “provides the source, criterion and goal of the struggle everywhere today for new societies which can do justice to man and human dignity.”¹⁶⁵ It means “power, not of self-righteousness but of grace – to do the good one would and to live”,¹⁶⁶ providing courage to “grapple with the evils in us and around us, because we know that the Crucified and Risen Jesus remains the power of the Kingdom, operating in us and the world today.”¹⁶⁷ For Thomas, the power of Divine forgiveness is the power which makes mutual human forgiveness possible, as a “new force...destroying the spirit of enmity and creating a ferment of genuine humanism”.¹⁶⁸ Thus Thomas urges: “Forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you” (Col. 3:13),¹⁶⁹ considering mutual forgiveness on the basis of solidarity in sin as essential to the vision for new humanity in Christ for oppressed and oppressor alike.

Significantly, Solomon affirmed Thomas’s reflections on forgiveness as relevant for Dalit theology. While accepting that forgiveness must be related to justice, Solomon commented that transformation will only take place when one recognises the judgement and forgiveness offered on the Cross.¹⁷⁰ The sense of divine forgiveness is the only power which enables one to extend a ‘generosity of forgiveness’ to the oppressor within everyday relationships.¹⁷¹ Forgiveness and justice remain integrally related within a context of Dalit inequality, injustice and oppression. M.M. Thomas does not shy away from the difficult theological questions raised by the concept of forgiveness in such a context, but points to the Cross of Christ as the essential paradigm for transformation in the heart of this context. Certainly the challenge remains in seeking to translate theology into practice, not only for Dalits but for the wider theological community. Although he did not speak

¹⁶⁵ M.M. Thomas, “The Divine Forgiveness”, *The Gospel of Forgiveness and Koinonia*, pp. 1-2

¹⁶⁶ M.M. Thomas, “The Gospel of the Kingdom”, 1970, Sermon manuscript, UTC archives, Bangalore.

¹⁶⁷ M.M. Thomas, “The Cross and the Kingdom of God”, *New Creation in Christ*, p. 20

¹⁶⁸ M.M. Thomas, “The Use and Place of the Bible for Christians in their Professional and Social Environment”, Emmanuel, S. David, ed. *The Bible in Today’s Context*, Madras: Senate of Serampore College, 1994, p. 52

¹⁶⁹ M.M. Thomas, “The New Creation in Christ”, p. 3

¹⁷⁰ Interview; Solomon

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

from the perspective of the oppressed, Thomas's vision of new humanity in Christ based on the forgiveness of sin sought to overcome the reality of oppression faced by the poor and the exploited in India. In seeking to relate theology to justice, and to overcome division and oppression in favour of human equality and dignity, it is argued that the theology of M.M. Thomas remains relevant to Dalit theological discourse today.

4. Conclusion

The contribution of the students has added an essential voice to this research thesis. Significantly, the students acknowledged the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas as relevant to the emergence and continuance of Dalit theology. Particular acknowledgement was afforded Thomas's assertion that 1) theology is dynamic, ongoing, and essentially contextual; 2) the Newness of Christ relates to individual and community, affecting individual and social relations; 3) Humanisation, concerned with human empowerment of the poor and the oppressed in the struggle against hegemonic traditional structures, is a primary theological concern.

Based on a critical assessment of Dalit theology it has been argued that M.M. Thomas's theology redresses the lop-sided interpretation of sin undertaken within a methodologically exclusive and dichotomous framework. While accepting the concept of 'sinned-against' as a valid theological category for Dalit discourse, students expressed concern over a rigid use of the term. It was argued that Thomas's universal understanding of sin does not preclude the legitimacy of the concept of sinned-against as a theological category, but rejects it as an absolute category removed from a broader conceptual understanding of sin.

The issue of forgiveness raised significant questions and challenges based upon the reality of Dalit indignity and powerlessness, as well as gender indignity and powerlessness within the Dalit community. A methodological framework of bipolarity was thus considered inadequate for theological reflection on forgiveness. Dignity and power were considered essential features of Dalit theological discourse. It was argued that M.M. Thomas's theology sought to relate theology to the issue of

justice and power in the midst of inequality and injustice, cautioning against the abuse of forgiveness as a tool for maintaining the status quo. Thomas urged reconciliation based upon the understanding that God's forgiveness becomes the power and source for mutual forgiveness.

The students asserted that M.M. Thomas had effectively 'laid the foundation' for liberation theology in India. Certainly the diachronic and dynamic movement of Dalit Christian theology views the contribution of M.M. Thomas critically on the grounds of contextual and existential necessity. Yet it has been argued that Thomas's attempt to make theology challengingly relevant to the people, concerned in particular for the liberation of the 'least of these' in India, makes his theological contribution relevant to Dalit theological discourse today.

Conclusion

Dalit theology emerged in radical discontinuity with the prevalent tradition of caste Indian Christian theology. In order to assert Dalit identity, first generation Dalit theologians adopted a dichotomous and exclusive methodological strategy which effectively set Dalit theology against Indian Christian theology. The movement of Dalit theology began in order to reflect the daily realities of pain-pathos experience, and was thus a theology of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits. A further reason for adopting this strategy was to protect Dalit theology from the hegemonic theological tradition prevalent in India, driven by a fear that Dalit theology would simply be accommodated, assimilated and finally conquered as a result of such hegemony. These points of essential concern remain significant today. A hermeneutical principle of suspicion remains necessary in order to caution against losing the distinct and invaluable theological contribution of Dalits. It is clear, however, that first generation Dalit theologians took this principle of suspicion to absolute lengths, adopting a strategy which set Dalit theology rigidly apart from Indian traditional theology in order to create a counter theology relevant exclusively to Dalits. Within this dichotomous framework, M.M. Thomas was effectively dismissed by first generation Dalit theologians as an elite caste Indian Christian theologian irrelevant for Dalit liberation.

Through close reading of Thomas's oeuvre and critical analysis of predominant first generation Dalit theologians, Bishop M. Azariah and Bishop V. Devasahayam, however, key points of theological resonance with Thomas's theology have been identified. The influence of Thomas has been clearly identified within the theological writings of Azariah and Devashayam. Certainly Thomas was not Dalit, and did not attempt to write a theology with specific concern for Dalits. Nor did his theology speak specifically to the issue of caste. Yet this thesis demonstrated that the rigid framework adopted by first generation Dalit theologians failed to adequately locate M.M. Thomas's theology. It was argued that M.M. Thomas was an Indian liberation theologian opposed to caste communalism, class injustice and human indignity, and a man searching for a dynamic theological foundation adequate to the quest for a full, liberating and

just Indian society. His attempts to articulate a theology challengingly relevant to the people during a time of rapid religio-secular and social change in India raised key theological questions concerning the relationship between salvation and humanisation. Influenced by the revolutionary self-awakening of the poor and oppressed for social liberation, Thomas brought the concept of humanisation and justice into the fore of theological debate. Centred on the paradigm of the Cross and New Humanity in Christ, Thomas sought to bring theology into the heart of India's quest for social transformation based upon the principles of humanisation and justice as persons-in-community. Humanisation, for Thomas, essentially included transformation from indignity to dignity, inequality to equality, injustice to justice, and powerlessness to empowering identity and socio-political participation. Seeking to redress a lop-sided theology in India which failed to adequately relate theology to the process of social transformation, Thomas urged Christians and the Church towards responsible action in the struggle against all obstacles to humanisation.

The Dalit quest to create an authentic theology of liberation for Dalits sharpened theological protest against the oppressive and dehumanising caste system. Identifying this system as the primary source of historical Dalit oppression, indignity, injustice and powerlessness, Dalit theology brought the struggle against the caste system into the heart of theological reflection and praxis. Dalit theology remains invaluable in leading this protest. Yet the methodological approach adopted by first generation Dalit theologians had significant *theological* consequences. The concept of Dalits as sinned-against, and the concept of God's direct option for the Dalits, emerged as a result of attempts to theologise within a dichotomous methodological framework.

Discourse with second generation Dalit theologians raised significant critical concerns which highlighted the weakness in such a methodology for theological reflection. In the first place, the dichotomy between the sinner and the sinned-against became blurred, given the reality of patriarchy prevalent within, but not exclusive to, Dalit communities. Dalit men categorised as sinned-against when set against caste sinners, become sinners when set against oppressed Dalit women, posing essential problems to the theological assertion that God's direct option is for the sinned-against Dalits.

The concept of sinned-against, while acknowledged as significant for Dalit theological discourse, was challenged by Dalit students for its lop-sided emphasis on corporate sin. This thesis argued that M.M. Thomas's theology redressed this imbalance. While not precluding the legitimacy of 'sinned-against' as a theological category, given the reality of exploitation and oppression as a result of corporate sin, Thomas held this concern within a broader conceptual understanding of sin that did not deny the reality of individual sin.

The term 'theological signpost' has been used in this thesis, acknowledging that M.M. Thomas's theology cannot simply be transposed into the Dalit context. An essential epistemological point of departure with Thomas based upon the existential reality of Dalit pathos experience was noted. The issue of forgiveness, central to Thomas's theology, while considered essential to Dalit theological discourse today, demands continued evaluation in light of particular Dalit context and experience. New questions concerning forgiveness were raised by Dalit theologians based upon the reality of oppression and powerlessness, bringing essential questions of human dignity and power into the realm of theological discourse and praxis. A study on the theological concept of forgiveness throughout history from a Dalit perspective, and its relevance for theological discourse today, is surely overdue.

Dalit theology did not emerge in a theological vacuum. The influence of Black theology and Liberation theology, as well as the significant influence of Ambedkar and emerging Dalit secular ideologies and movements within India, all played a part in shaping emerging Dalit theological discourse. Dalit theology is also essentially enriched by its own historical sources, stories and traditions, from both Dalit Christians and non-Christian Dalits. Yet for the sake of theological enrichment, this thesis opens up a further source for critical engagement and discourse relevant for present day Dalit theology; the theology of M.M. Thomas. Contributing significant theological signposts for Dalit theology, M.M. Thomas may be identified as an ally, and not a foe, in the continued Dalit theological quest for social transformation, humanisation, justice and dignity. Certainly the diachronic and dynamic movement of Dalit theology will continue to view the theological contribution of M.M. Thomas critically on the grounds of contextual and epistemological necessity. Indeed, in the light of Thomas's desire to seek a living theology challengingly relevant to the Indian

people, one cannot help feel that this is exactly what Thomas himself would have wanted.

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