Christian Scriptures and Other Scriptures: Theses Towards a Study of the Significance of Scripture

FRANCIS X. D'SA*

1. The experience of Language is an experience of both Meaning and Meaningfulness.

1.1. By Meaning I understand all those types of Meaning (literal, implied, secondary, suggested, etc.) which make up the warp and woof of Subject-Object Language. Basically their function is descriptive and informative, and pragmatic life is possible because of them. It is the exigencies of pragmatic life that demand empirical Verification or Falsification. More often than not, the practice of a pragmatic life is accompanied by a naive-realistic epistemological belief in the dichotomy of Subject-Object, Knower-Known, Subjective Knowing and Objective Reality.

1.2 By Meaningfulness I mean that Significance which accompanies all our knowing, motivates all our actions and supports our search for "meaning" in Life. It is through Meaningfulness that someone becomes dear to us, that something becomes part of us and of our conscious Life. It is Meaningfulness which makes us see through the ephemeral externals to that Mystery which makes the externals be what they are.

1.3 Ontologically Meaning is the *śarīra-* and Meaningfulness the *ātmā* of Language. The *ātmā* makes the *śarīra-* be, though it is only in and through the *śarīra-* that we experience the *ātmā*.

1.4 Though the *śarīra-* exists because of the *ātmā* and though, when the *śarīra-* is experienced, the *ātmā* is experienced, our state of ontic *āvidyā* makes us selectively concentrate on the *śarīra-* alone. Just as Man is one being who is em-bodied so too we have one Language wherein Meaning is Meaning-ful. However, our dichotomized way of looking at our own experience creates the impression that there are two types of Language. (It would be less incorrect to speak of two uses of Language.) Thus, having eyes we do not see and having ears we do not hear the Significance that is present in the *śarīra-* experience.

1.5 With this we produce a value-system that is built on a fundamental alienation and does lip-service to the Realm of the *ātmā*. The Nominalism which consequently flows from this value-system is not unconnected with the Religion practised on this level.

* Fr D'Sa SJ is on the staff of the Institute for the Study of Religion, Pune.

1.6 The Language of Meaningfulness is Metaphor which is that striking use of Language wherein the Subject-Object Realm is so presented that it is transcended, not neglected, but in such a way that it points to its Meaningfulness.

1.7 A Metaphor is verified existentially, not empirically.

1.7.1 Existential Verification occurs when the Meaningfulness of a Metaphor is experientially realized. This is so because the Realm of Meaningfulness, not being the same as that of Meaning, is not a new kind of Meaning that through the back-door, as it were, takes us back to the Realm of Subject-Object Language.

1.7.2 The function of a Metaphor is not Information but Transformation. Hence, Verification of a Metaphor means the Transformation it leads to.

1.8 A Metaphor is a linguistic Symbol.

1.8.1 A Symbol by asserting itself points beyond itself. However, pointing beyond itself is not pointing "outside" of itself.

1.8.2 To reify/substantialize a Symbol is to make a *śava-* (corpse) out of a *śarīra-* (*corpus*). To do this is to overlook the "symbolic difference" (Panikkar).

1.9 Metaphors are polysemous but not polemic. A Metaphor can be meaningful in diverse ways to different people but a Metaphor does not, cannot, contradict another, since contradiction belongs to the Realm of Meaning only.

1.10 Hence it can never be the case that a Metaphor is right or wrong; it can only be more relevant or less relevant.

1.11. Metaphors are of a piece with the World-view in which they are born. Consequently a study of Metaphors should lead to a study of their World-views.

2. Religious Experience is the experience of Significance (=Meaningfulness), and is not limited to any particular area of Life.

2.1 Because there can be no-thing (i.e., no Meaning whatever) without Significance (ontologically speaking), the experience of Significance is available in every field of Life.

2.2. From this point of view the distinction between the Sacred and the Profane cannot be meaningfully upheld.

2.3 The Language of Religious Experience is Metaphor.

2.4 As in the case of every Metaphor, the validity of a Religious Metaphor is dependent on its capacity to produce the experience which it professes and promises.

2.5 If Religious Metaphors are Beliefs, Faith is the Significance which is embodied by them.

2.5.1 Faith is the experience of the Significance which makes anything be and Belief is its em-bodiment. Faith without Belief is blind and Belief without Faith is empty.

2.5.1.1. Doctrines and Dogmas are further articulations of Beliefs. Doctrines are Manifestos whereas Dogmas are Constitutions.

2.5.1.2 When discussing Christian Scriptures and Other Scriptures, Beliefs are more important than Doctrines and Dogmas.

2.5.1.3 Similarly the Source and Substance of any Tradition is to be sought in its Faith and Beliefs, not in its Doctrines and Dogmas.

2.6 Religion is the personal pursuit of Religious Experience.

2.6.1 Personal pursuit, unlike individual pursuit, is always a collective, better still, a community enterprise and takes place through an organically connected Complex of Beliefs and Symbols.

2.6.2 In the World Religions, the historical Source of the development of the Complex of Beliefs and Symbols is its Scripture, whereas its a historical Source is the Originary Experience of the founding Seer or Community.

3. Scripture is primarily the immediate but definitive expression of a Community's Religious Experience.

3.1 Both Immediacy and Definitiveness are substantiated *a posteriori*, not *a priori*.

3.1.1 Only that Text (and/or Tradition) which every generation treats as the Starting-point and the Direction of its pursuit of Religious Experience is taken to be Scripture because it presents its credentials of Immediacy and Definitiveness.

3.1.2 Immediacy is substantiated by the appeal such a Text exercises among different and differing World-views. That is to say, Immediacy shows the " freshness " of its expression by its appeal to differing groups—synchronically and diachronically. Such a universal appeal can be explained only if the expression has preserved the fragrance of the Originary Experience.

3.1.3 The Definitiveness of a Scripture is demonstrated by the fact that its (that is the Scripture's) Text is considered sacred and immutable and is consequently canonized.

3.1.4 If, as in Christianity, the " content " of Scripture is taken to be Revelation and the mould in which the Author(s) wrote it is said to be Inspiration, then it must be remembered that Revelation and Inspiration are part of the Christian Complex of Symbols.

3.1.4.1 Thus, Revelation would be that " unchangeable human structure " through which the Significance of Man and his World is experienced.

3.1.4.2 Similarly Inspiration would be the lightning-flash which made manifest to the Scripture-Author(s) the Significance of such a structure.

3.2 A study of the Significance of a Scripture is to be undertaken either from the view-point of its Complex of Symbols or from that of the Needs and the Wants of Man.

3.2.1 Precisely because of its Complex of Symbols, the Significance of a Scripture is de-*finite* in both its meanings, that is, it is not something vague and at the same time it is not limitless.

3.2.2 Hence no Scripture can claim to convey totally the totality (*totum et totaliter*) of Significance.

3.2.2.1 This implies that all the exclusive claims and assertions of any particular Tradition cannot be extrapolated, firstly because Metaphors are *per se* affirmative of (not negative to what lies outside of) an experience, and secondly because they can be meaningful only within their own Complex of Symbols and thirdly because "exclusivisitic" assertions are not informative statements but belong (if anywhere) only within the ambience of Transformation.

3.2.2.2 Historically each Religious Tradition has, by taking what is specific to itself, attempted to demonstrate its superiority to others. By the same token, of course, the inferiority of each Tradition could be established.

3.2.2.3 There is therefore no unassailable method of proving the absolute or relative superiority of any one Scripture. For any such attempt could equally well be made by all other Scriptures.

3.2.3 All this in no way militates against the uniqueness of a Scripture.

3.2.3.1 Such uniqueness is concretized in the perspective of Man and World that the Scripture lends to those who have eyes.

3.2.3.2 It is this uniqueness that is at work in its Complex of Symbols.

3.2.3.3. Hence a Symbol is understandable only in the context of its relatedness to the other Symbols of the same Tradition.

3.2.4 Scripture, having as its goal the Salvation or *Mokṣa* or *Nirvāṇa*, of Man, has to correspond to the Needs and the Wants of Man.

3.2.4.1 The Needs of Man are those which are basic and essential to all Men of all times but the Wants of Man are relative to this geographical, political and economic History.

3.2.4.2 Any Scripture worth the name has to *correspond* to these Needs and Wants of Man.

3.2.4.3 Inasmuch as Scriptures correspond to the Needs of Man, they appeal to all Men of all times (that is, if they are open to them), but inasmuch as they correspond to the Wants of Man, they have only limited appeal.

3.2.4.3.1 Not all those writings which are alleged to be Scriptures are really Scriptures in the strict sense of the word. For example, large portions of the Veda or the Book of Numbers in the Pentateuch.

3.2.4.3.2 Conversely, there are writings which are professedly not considered Scriptures but which *de facto* spiritually nourish a Community, for example the *Bhagavadgītā*, the major *Abhaṅga-s* of Tukārāma.

3.2.4.4 This explains both the Universality of some portions of Scriptures as well as the Particularity of others.

3.2.5 The Source of a Scripture, its goal and its purpose are all communitarian, never individualistic. Even if Scripture appeals to the Individual, it does so inasmuch as he is a Person, that is inasmuch as he is capable of communing.

3.2.5.1 Hence any development which goes against the Personal and the Communitarian springs from the individualistic aspect of Man.

That is to say, a development which takes absolutely no notice of and has no regard for the Personal and the Communitarian is solipsistically subjectivistic.

3.2.6 On the Reader's or Hearer's side, therefore, the approach to Scripture has to be personal and holistic, that is, appealing to the whole Person.

3.2.6.1 All understanding of Scripture has to lead to the understanding of oneself, that is one's Self. Interpretation is a means to Introspection. Interpretation has to show the way through which the human heart can commune with the heart of Scripture.

3.2.6.2 All the "scientific" methods of Exegesis are valid and necessary inasmuch as they are or can be ancillary to communing with Scripture.

3.2.6.3 On the "Christian" side we have an especially valuable method for communing with Scripture (a method developed during the patristic period, later forgotten but revived again by Ignatius of Loyola) in the so-called Application of the Spiritual Senses.

3.2.6.4 On the "Indian" side, we have the *Dhvani* method discovered and elaborated in the field of *Kāvya-śāstra*, but relevant in all spheres of Metaphor-language.

3.3 If Scripture is the product of the Religious Experience of a Community and if the goal of Scripture is to keep the Community communing by means of Religious Experience and finally if all this is effected through Metaphor-language, then formation of Groups and Confessions is not necessarily anti-communitarian.

3.3.1 The formation of Confessions or Groups is even salvific if it is built on a specific experience of Significance.

3.3.2 If, however, a Confession militates against the proclamation of another Group's experience of Significance, it thereby undermines its own proclamation.

3.3.2.1 Historically, Confessions are salvific as regards their proclamations but not as regards their declamations.

3.3.2.1.1 Rejection of the Doctrines and Dogmas of another Confession in the process of theological debates is a healthy exercise which helps a Tradition to keep itself trim by cutting down its dogmatic fat.

3.3.2.2 To accept the Significance represented (re-*presented*!) and kept alive by a Confession is to accept that Ultimate Significance is and can be only One and that the Significance witnessed to by the Confessions is a partial experience of a larger Ultimate.

3.3.2.2.1 The approaches and perspectives of the various Confessions make sense only when they are seen as complementing, not contradicting, each other.

3.3.2.2.2 Thus all approaches and perspectives in a Tradition become relative, not relativistic, and this is of a piece with the Language of Metaphor.

3.3.2.3 Many Paradigms and Models can simultaneously co-exist in the World of Scripture because they function on the level of Significance, where "both....and" is possible, unlike in Science which functions on the level of Meaning and where only "either... or" is possible.

3.4 All this is *a fortiori* applicable and valid in the case of World Religions and their Scriptures.

3.4.1 Since the Realm of Significance is inexhaustible, Religious Pluralism is of the essence.

3.4.2 Acceptance of Religious Pluralism is neither a tactic nor a *captatio benevolentiae* nor a virtue made out of necessity; rather it is a religious virtue (=*virtus*, *dunamis*) flowing from an enlightened articulation of Religious Experience.

3.4.3 Witness to one's Religious Experience as something unique but limited and as therefore in need of being complemented is the Principle and Foundation of Religious Pluralism.

3.4.4 For, this attitude preserves on the one hand the specificity of a Tradition and, on the other, makes place for the multiplicity of co-existing Traditions as complements to it.

3.5 The aim in studying Religions is not so much a comparison of their respective Metaphors as a preparation for an experience of and an in-*sight* into their respective Complex of Metaphors.

3.5.1 The door to another Religion (=Religious Experience of another Tradition) can only be such an insight into its Metaphors and Symbols. Without this no understanding of any Religion is possible, and an interpretation which is not a product of such an experience is an empty cymbal.

3.5.2 To understand any Scripture is to stand under its spell (Panikkar). This general hermeneutic principle, the Principle of Communion, is of special Relevance to India, the Land of the five Religions.

3.5.2.1 Without the help of this Principle of Communion no conversion is possible.

3.5.2.1.1 Just as no Search is possible without a previous Discovery, so too no conversion is possible without a previous Communion.

3.5.2.2 Ultimately Communion and Conversion are the basic *a priori*-s for any hermeneutic.

3.5.2.2.1 Communion leads to Conversion and Conversion to deeper Communion.

3.5.2.2.2 In this sense Communion and Conversion are prerequisites for as well as products of Scripture.

3.5.2.2.3 For in the last analysis it is Significance as a final cause that attracts and as an efficient cause that effects understanding. And the centripetal force of Significance is Communion and its centrifugal force is Conversion. Search and Discovery are other names for Conversion and Communion in the Realm of Religion.

4. Excursus: The Jesus of History and the Kṛṣṇa of Faith.

4.1 The beginnings of the Christian Experience have their source in the Jesus of History who is not different from the Christ of Faith. It is *in* the Jesus of History that Christians recognize the Christ of Faith. This is not the same as saying that the Christ of Faith is completely identical with the Jesus of History. The Jesus of History as such is subject to the laws of historical reality, but this cannot be said of the Christ of Faith. The total reality that the Jesus of History is, is no doubt *in* History but not *of* History. It is Faith that gives birth to the Belief that Jesus is the Christ. And *this* is not a matter subject to the laws of space and time. Without the Christ of Faith the Jesus of History would not have been of much consequence to the History of Mankind. The importance of the Jesus of History lies in the fact that through Him and with Him and in Him the Christ of Faith becomes accessible to Men. This is important not only to locate the *source* of Faith in Christ but also to realize the unique nature of the Beliefs, that is, the Articles of Faith. The " historical " nature of the Christic experience is an argument for its specificity but not for its superiority.

4.2 The Origin of Faith in Kṛṣṇa is a-historical and is embodied in the Kṛṣṇa-myths. This determines the unique nature of the Beliefs of this Faith. Because of the a-historical Origin of the Kṛṣṇa of Faith, the understanding of Man, World and God is different. History, for example, not being the ambience of Salvation History but of Damnation History, is of use only inasmuch as it helps Man to construct a paradigmatic Meta-History. Free from the laws of History, the formation and growth of the Kṛṣṇa-myths take place according to the Needs and Wants of Man. This allows a plurality of Beliefs which is not compatible, for example, in the case of the Jesus of History. But the a-historical nature of the Kṛṣṇa-experience is an argument only for its specificity, not for its superiority. The *locus* of the Kṛṣṇa of Faith is to be sought in the various Kṛṣṇa-myths, but he is neither exhausted by nor identical with them. The Kṛṣṇa of Faith becomes accessible to Mankind through them and with them and in them. He is in the Myths but not of the Myths.

4.3 We become aware of Myth (=the Horizon of our understanding) either through myths (=stories which stress Significance by transcending the distinction between the factual and the non-factual in their structure and their subject) or through History (=stories which stress the Significnace of certain factual happenings). History analyses the Time of Significance and shows the fragile and fragmentary nature of the Temporal. Myths stress the Significance of Time and lead to an experience of the Tempiternal. Man without History is directionless but Man without myths would be rootless. The ultimate purpose of History is to lead to the Significance of Man-in-the-World whereas the ultimate purpose of myths is to transmit the Significance of the World-of-Man. Because of this, the " historical " world-view is anthropocentric, and the " a-historical " world-view is cosmic. Each is merely a view, not a vision. Only when the two combine can we have a vision, a depth-vision.