

Response to Vinoth Ramachandran's Presentation
By Joseph Komar

The quest for the recognition of once identity as a people is a reality in the post colonial era. In Malaysia the Dayak a tribe in East Malaysia are rejecting their categorization of ethnicity as *lain lain*. Theirs is cry for recognition of ones own identity. Vinoth has aptly brought to the fore ethnic realities in South Asia. As a Sri Lankan the crisis affecting the nation would be surely close to his heart. However when the crisis in the Jaffna state of North Sri Lanka escalated, Tamils all over the world began a lobby to stop the war or the genocide as interpreted by some. While today open combat has ended, the dilemma to bring peace amongst the people is jurassic in nature. Sri Lanka not only has to deal with Tamil minority in their homeland but also the cry of a community all over the world. Here ethnic identity transcends nationalism. Asia has her fair share of ethnic problems. Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, India and China are some nations where we read via media of ethnic conflicts. While politically nations may be battling to reduce this divide, this dilemma is also affecting the church. Miroslav Volf remarks in his book Exclusion and Embrace that in many communities ethnic identity superseded Christian convictions. He said that people are more comfortable to fall back on ethnic rather than a Christian identity. While Vinoth calls for an engagement of the Christian community fired by strong theological convictions of sin and reconciliation, however the Church herself has succumbed to problems plaguing ethnic communities all over the world.

The Church is the paradigmatic community of what it means that Jesus came to give humanity fullness¹ of life. In a world where science and technology claims to put the anomalies of life right – quick fix for all problems, where new age beliefs claim to have a cure, where other religions promise hope for fallen humanity or where hedonism gives a temporary high the paths taken by the empirical Church just becomes another way. Theological pluralism further affirms this perception of the Church. Often sin, living in denial of error within the Christian community undermines the missional force of the Church. The Church is mastering the art of eloquence in the presentation of the Gospel but she is very far from what it means exemplifying the faith in concrete realities. The twentieth century has seen death and displacement of people arising out of ethnic conflicts unprecedented in the history of humankind. In some nations the two warring ethnic communities are Christian like in Rwanda between the Tutsis and Hutus and the blacks and whites in the United States². The Third Reich and the holocaust; Christian Germany did not have the rhetoric to address this atrocity³. Theo Tschuy states in *Ethnic Conflict and Religion* that there are 'dark recesses' in Christian belief. He states that churches have 'pious declaration' but are not moved or have the capacity (theological framework) to engage in the brokenness and hurts of humans especially in the area of ethnic conflicts. He says -

¹ John 10:30a

² While the issue in Rwanda is genocide precipitated by cultural and political differences, the issue of blacks and whites in South Africa and in the United States is both sociological and theological.

³ The Barmen Declaration was the only concerted effort made to resist Hitler. On the whole Christian Germany bought the ideologies of Nazism.

If Christianity wishes to shake off its ambivalence and become a truly prophetic instrument in God's hand, it must engage in a credible self-examination which acknowledges its disobedience and spells out its multiple forms of complicity.⁴

Theo in his book brings to the fore ethnic conflicts the last millennium. No part of the globe has been spared from ethnic conflicts and he is right in stating that the church is not doing enough. Duncan Forrester in his work on the church as the egalitarian community says that "the church has been deeply penetrated and corrupted by the inequalities and divisions of the world. It has absorbed much of this into its own structures and ways of working. It reflects and reinforces divisions and inequalities...."⁵ What Forrester says in a way explains why the church is slow to respond to ethnic conflicts because within the structure of the church ethnocentrism thrives. George Kelsey says that in regards ethnic relations the church has failed to speak the Word. He says the Church "has appealed to the conclusions of the social sciences and humanitarian ideals of the culture, but the relationship of these to biblical faith has often been established only in platitude"⁶. Kelsey is right only in that the word as objective as possible is not presented. His concern is that church is not speaking up from a biblical platform. Christian social agencies of change need to give a strong rhetoric against all that is dehumanizing. In many societies the absolute truth is distorted – half truth. Half truth is tantamount to give rise to heresy. Therefore Iain Mclean statement that "racism emerged from deeply Christian societies and, in most cases, with the church playing an ambiguous role in both contributing to such racisms as well as protesting them" is right.⁷ The Christian White church of South Africa that oppressed the black community; White Anglo Saxon Protestants in North America who marginalized the blacks, so what Ian Mclean states is right. The all is well syndrome that plagues the church as the prophets of old battled to remind the people of Israel to rise up from their complacent nature. In fact they were very direct in stating that prophets (false) were misdirecting the community into an all okay scenario. Sad to say many present a noble picture of the church today. Chris P. Price interviewed by David Neff of Christianity Today says that our theology should interrogate our lives.

The theology that undergirds community is opening our lives up to be interrogated by the Sermon on the Mount. That defines what it means to be a church that follows Jesus Christ faithfully. Allowing ourselves to study Scripture without justifying the way our lives already exist and

⁴ Theo Tschuy *Ethnic Conflict and Religion: Challenge to the Churches*. (Geneva: WCC Publications 1997), 140.

⁵ Duncan B. Forrester *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality*. (London: SCM Press 2001),198.

⁶ George Kelsey *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man: Scribner Studies in Contemporary Theology*. (New York :Charles Scribners Sons 1965),253.

⁷ Ian S. Mclean, *Dangerous Memories, Daring Documents, and the Demands of Discipleship: The Christian Church, Racism, and Racial Justice*. *Missiology An International Review* Vol XXXII:1, 2004:16

allowing ourselves to go on a journey whereby we will be interrupted. and to be listening together in friendship with others for those interruptions.⁸

Chris Price is addressing the hurt of many communities because they are different. He says ethnic concerns are so glozed over by the empirical church that not much is being done. Chris touches on a nerve of the church and she must acknowledge that apathy and failure to respond to injustice is tantamount to sin. There is a great need by individuals to search their hearts for sin especially in regards the different other. Like wise the corporate body also needs to act accordingly.

Therefore while the Church champions the cause for justice and reconciliation, she is also duty bound to critically investigate herself as community. To address the ethnic divide within her community. The Church must never loose her call to witness in a broken world. She has the capacity to present herself as the only community that has worked to transcend ethnic differences without losing once ethnic identity.

⁸ Christ P. Price *Theology Should Interrogate Our Lives* www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/147/ 12-4-2002