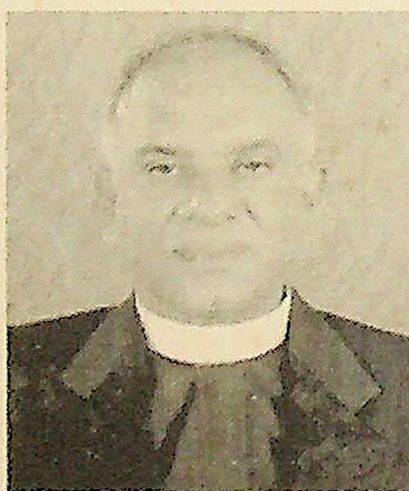




**THE PLACE OF
MUSIC AND SYMBOLS
IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION
IN THE CONTEXT OF
A MULTI-FAITH SOCIETY:**



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Music and symbols form an integral part of education in any culture, as aids in communication and teaching. In India, knowledge was taught and preserved through slokas, mantras, songs and a variety of religious symbols. Jews used the medium of psalm singing in their everyday life. Chanting and symbols of worship were invariably used in churches. Different church traditions like Orthodox, Anglican and Catholic continue to use them while in the protestant tradition chanting is replaced by hymn singing. In some denominations in Kerala, the traditional church festivals are replaced by church conventions. Both of them have educational values. Education is related to the growth of a person. Religion also is concerned about growth. Hence we see that all great religious personalities are great teachers. Jesus Christ himself was a famous teacher.

Proper Educational Principles and Methods

Any religious movement is meaningless without proper educational principles and methods. In religion the main values concerned are incorporated through relevant media of music, art and architecture and the symbols. Vice versa a balanced holistic primary education needs to have art, music, religious and physical education within the content of education.

Three Dimensions of Cultural Influence

1. Tradition

Cultural attitudes of the modern man are influenced by his tradition, his surrounding environment as well as the global environment. We cannot deny our past traditions. They are at the root of our culture. Even our faith is rooted in the past. Faith of our fathers is transferred to us. The media of faith, namely art and music, are very much a part of our belief. eg: Beads and symbols of the Cross. For many people media is the message and the media of faith is faith itself. For example, if the Syrian chanting of the Orthodox Church is replaced by the Hindu "mantrocharanam"



using Christian faith, the average worshipper who doesn't understand the language will feel that the church is turned into a temple. This will not attract the Hindus either. In popular cinemas, where they want to portray the value of goodness, often time a church may be presented with organ music, which shows the deep-rooted image of art and music within the minds of ordinary people.

2. Neighbourhood and Society

A scene of great influence is our environment. We cannot deny the fact that art and music of the area, inspite of caste, religion or culture is highly influenced by the popular religions of the area. Even prior to ecclesiastical hierarchy preaching on ecumenism, people shared each other's religion and cultural festivals. It is a common sight to see a Hindu going to a church festival or a Christian going to a Hindu festival. More than religious harmony, a festival becomes an area festival organised probably by a community of one particular religious background. Places like Velankanny, Malayattoor are examples of this in South India. People of any religion can go there, participate in the prayers and festivals. Even the famous Maramon Convention of the Mar Thoma Church on the banks of Pamba River has a place name attached to it and is not limited to Mar Thoma people alone. **Worship should be related to life and in true worship we cannot deny what happens around us. We should be able to receive the good elements from other cultures while trying to give what is good in us.**

3. Universal Cultural Context

A third dimension is that of the universal cultural context. The interaction of the different life patterns and cultural values is more than ever before in our time. Christianity has contributed greatly to the universal culture. The Church has not been a static phenomenon but has adapted greatly by accommodating and accepting the cultural heritage of the place in which it was growing. For example, Christmas is a festival celebrated all over the world by people of all creeds. In origin, it is very much a Roman Festival and it is very difficult to prove that Jesus was born



on the 25th of December. Around the 4th century, Christians started celebrating the birth of Christ on the day of the Roman Festival. Today, secular celebrations of the Christmas festival are more than the religious celebrations.

With the advance of modern communications and the migration and mixing of people, interaction of the different cultures of the world has become a reality. This reality extends to all spheres of our life. The Church is a universal fellowship above the limitations of time and space, and interaction is very important within the church. **When we sing the Negro Spiritual, 'When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go' we share the faith of the Negro who sang it first and join the struggle of the Israelites who lived centuries ago and identify with the struggle of the people of our own times.**

Many hymns used in the Churches are sung widely all over the world in different languages in the same tune. Bible is translated into almost all languages. The Biblical truth is universal, the context Middle East, but the recipients, people of different languages. Or take a symbol like light. It is a widely accepted custom in religious as well as secular ceremonies, to light a lamp. The Church in India may be small but greatly present the above three dimensions. The Church, to be real and fruitful and to be truly ecumenical, should retain the balance among the above mentioned factors.

Uniformity and Diversity

Indian Culture is a conglomerate of diversified beliefs, life patterns, races, castes, languages and what not. The social changes that took place are also wide, and difficult to analyse. Intergration, unification are all seen on the one side while retaining separate identity and bargaining on the basis of that identity is a common phenomenon of our time.

Even the Church is following the pattern of the society. On the one side we have ecumenical movement and discussion for Church union but on the other side we are losing out on joint action. In the field of religious education in Kerala we had Sunday



School Union, Children's Special Service Mission and Student Christian Movement, unifying and combining the activities of different denominations. At present these influences are almost extinct. Denominational organizations are much stronger, teaching self identity. All these have their implications on art and music also.

Communalism and Multi-Faith Society

India is a country with all the major religions of the world. The majority are Hindus with a wide variety of castes, sub-castes etc. India still has more Muslims than any Arab Country. Christianity existed from the 1st century itself. Judaism and Zoroastrianism had come to our soil even prior to that. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism were born in this country. In addition to all these we have animistic and tribal religions centred around different regions. We in India can proudly boast that we have the richest heritage of a multi faith society in the world. As a whole, during the past centuries, religious tolerance has been great.

But the communal situation in India is different from the above mentioned multi faith background. Communal affiliation of a person is stronger than his religious affiliation. People identify themselves as part of a community. I feel that the structure of Hindu religion has some influence on this. Faith is individual piety and relation to God. Instead of the corporate worship of the church, personal devotion to a deity is a common practice in Hinduism.

Hence music and art tend to cater to the needs of individual worship. In contrast to this idea of corporate worship, life and action are very much manifested in the Church. Group identity is a necessity for man's existence. **Group identity without a true and mature religious faith is the cause of communalism. And communal forces tend to use religion and faith for their own purposes. Unfortunately communalism has grasped the church also.**

Urban Church and Rural Church

Rural culture and urban culture have their impact on church life. Rural areas portray their own cultural identity while cities



have a multi cultural character. The elite will have a cosmopolitan culture while many average Indians will have a nostalgia for their own cultural identity and the younger generation will have a mixed identity. This phenomenon is very clear in church life. The local language is used in rural church for worship and songs. In a city the prestigious congregation will be an English congregation, dressed in a befitting manner for the service. Sometimes in the same church there will be services in different languages in addition to English.

Religious Symbols

Signs and symbols are an integral part of our life, especially in religion and religious education. Even without being religious, we use terms like O God, O christ, Allah, Iswara and so on . Many Christians use the symbolic gesture of signing of the cross. The same symbol may be used to give different ideas according to context. Red sign on the road is used for 'danger' or 'stop' while in Marxism it denotes revolution and for the church it represents Martyr Days on Pentecost. Serpent is a symbol of evil. In Kerala the picture of St. George killing the dragon is widely used. Snake worship is common among Hindus. Symbols can be classified into three, namely: symbolic structure, symbolic objects and symbolic action.

1. Symbolic Structure

Very often structures project Christianity and Gospel. The Church is the people of God, but often the church building becomes more important than the people. People associate sacredness to the church building and the equipment within it. The hierarchial structures of clergy also gives images. The re-enactment of the Eucharist is symbolic and educative. The priest takes the role of Christ in this. Even the re-discovery of the New Testament concept of priesthood of all believers has given new structures to the church.

2. Symbolic objects

The Bible is full of symbolic objects. To a great extent symbols are universal and common to different religions and cultures. The

difference may come only in presentation and interpretation. Light, wind, flowers, animals, fruit are all used as symbols. When organge and candles are used in Europe for Christingle services, rice and lamp have similar symbolic value in Indian context. Light is a common symbol used both in Churches and in Hindu temples. In Hinduism you come across Agni Bhagavan while in the Gospel, Jesus Christ himself is the Light of the world, both representing truth. Wind is a symbol of Hinduism, personified in Vayu Bhagavan, while in the Bible wind is personified in the Holy Spirit.

3. Symbolic Action

Every act of a human being is symbolic. It gives meaning to another person. In other words, symbolic acts are the basis of communication in the primary level, and language and words come only next. In religion, various symbols are used such as kneeling, lighting of lamps, holding of hands (kiss of peace), eating together etc. In Churches of western tradition the worship service starts with confession, kneeling, while the eastern tradition starts worship with praise, standing up. In Hindu tradition, people sit in a special posture for their meditation. In Islam worship also we notice all these different postures and gestures.

Symbols and their meanings are important in all religions. We should incorporate these into our religious education so that the children are taught to understand and appreciate the truth and values which these symbols communicate. Wrong interpretation and poor imitations should be avoided.

Music in Religion and Religious Education

Music is a very powerful medium in religion especially religious education. Music is taught and used in different levels. A primary classification is Folk Music and Art Music. What comes natural is Folk music (or popular music) and what is taught with a disciplined structure is Art Music (or classical music). In the Church, chanting or singing a hymn has corporate nature and hence it is included in the first category. An anthem or an oratorio



can be sung only by a trained choir and that can be included in the second category. Teaching music also has these two levels. Choir training is quite different from teaching choruses and songs in a Sunday School or a Youth Group. In Churches music is used in a wide variety of forms such as intoning, chanting, hymn singing, simple choruses for children, anthem or chorals by trained choir, musical plays and dramas, and through instruments.

Indian music also has parallel levels. The primary classification would be 'Margam' and 'Deshi'. Margam is the way to achieve salvation while Deshi is defined as national. Let me explain. Margam is simple and pure using only a few notes. Hence people can join without much training. Mantras and Bhajans are part of this. In mantra there are three notes used without 'Tala' and 'Raga' (Time and Scale). This technique is used in the chanting of other traditions too. Bhajans are also part of Margam and is possibly a developed form of Mantra and can be used for group singing. Teaching in this level is similar to the level of Chorus in Sunday School and Hymns in Churches. Music upto this level is very much alike using similar range of notes and comparison can be made as we did earlier. But different colours and shades are possible in different traditions as mentioned in the case of symbols. Many of these can be used in our Churches without much effort, if we are open to it. Alternative chanting for liturgy may be tried on experimental level first, which can add to the richness of the variety of worship in the Church.

'Deshi' is more complex in structure compared to 'Margam'. It is used for spiritual enjoyment, for worship and for concert performance based on the principles of Ragam, Thalam and Pallavi. Proper systematic training is a requirement at this level.

Geethams can be used for congregational participation in worship. In churches, hymns are at the congregational level of singing while anthems, solos, duets or chorals can be performed only by members of a choir after proper training. Proper training and skills are needed for the presentation of the Varnanas and Keerthans. It appears that they are developed in the background of individual worship of Hinduism. How effectively they can be



incorporated into our corporate worship needs experimentation. In meditation, definitely these may be effective.

Musical notations and musical instruments

Musical instruments are generally used as accompaniment adding beauty and colour. Educational values of teaching notation and musical instruments should be seriously considered. They can be used effectively in music teaching. Indian music is taught by repetitive singing. Notation and musical instruments can be used as aids to help this process. Teaching musical notation will help to develop reading skills in a child. Introducing a simple instrument like a Recorder at the age of seven will improve breathing technique, use of fingers, sensitivity to musical sounds, concentration and co-ordination. This will indirectly help the child's learning in general.

Singing or playing in a group will help the child to grow in relation to his neighbour. In other words educational values are centred around co-operation and harmonious growth instead of competition.

Musical Drama

The liturgy of the church is the enacting of a divine drama using all our God-given senses. The wholeness of the body is used by God in liturgy. All the five senses are used in traditional liturgy.

EYE: Architecture of the church, images, icons, stained glass windows, signs and symbols, robes, procession

EAR: Music and words, prayer, bells, clapping

TOUCH : Kiss of peace, laying on of hands, blessing by touch

SMELL:Smell of incense

TASTE: Taste of bread & wine

In religious education, musical dramas and dance dramas can be used very effectively as powerful teaching aids. Various art forms such as music, drama, stage setting and dance can be introduced. Different traditions can also be incorporated in the same piece.



Awareness of Churches

Music is a universal language. The church too is universal and it should be able to incorporate the rich variety in its life. Many churches are tradition-bound and are not prepared to grow creatively with time. Music is an integral part of church life but how many theological colleges have courses on Church Music? The churches in Kerala show some awareness in this field and the Orthodox Church has started a Department of Liturgical Music. Recently its Director, an Orthodox Priest, performed a Kachery in a Hindu Temple with the blessings of the hierarchy. The Mar Thoma Church also has a Department of Sacred Music. But there is a lack of trained personnel to teach music at the Sunday School level and choir level. New materials for teaching are also rarely available. We need more composers for the church who can incorporate all the traditions so that the music produced will fit into the multi faith Society we are living in. Awareness and action on the part of church leadership are needed in this regard.



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