

DANCE OF DIALOGUE: KRISTHA PATHA AS EMBODIED APOLOGETICS AND CHOREOGRAPHIC PATHWAY

I spent my childhood days and early school years on a mission compound in Mulki, India. It is a part of Tulunadu¹ in the coastal Karnataka area of India. When Western EUROPEAN missionaries came to this part of India and people were converted to Christianity, they were placed in mission compounds and provided housing and new occupational possibilities, thereby separating them from their relatives and loved ones. In most cases, people in mission compounds were barred from contact with any other faith communities, and people of other faiths were not allowed to live in mission compounds. Those of us who lived on mission compounds were told not to participate in any activities of other faiths. We had friends from other faiths through school, and though we occasionally invited them to church celebrations, we were strongly discouraged from participating in the activities of people of other faith communities and consequently were not able to experience the melodies, rhythms, and movements of other faith communities.

When I was in elementary school, a group of musicians entered our mission compound and started distributing leaflets about a movie that was being shown in a local theater. My father, a minister in the Basel Evangelical Mission tradition, which later became a church of South India, stopped them and told them sternly not to advertise inside the mission compound. A young boy at that time, I was totally confused by my father's attitude because the owner of the movie theater was a good friend of my dad, and my dad also used to attend the yearly festivals at the local Hindu temple, out of his respect for the Hindu workers on the farm he managed that belonged to the church. However, on this particular morning, my father might have thought these advertisers were violating the "sacred space" of the mission compound. Any religious conversations with people of other faiths was not possible in those days. However, thanks to deeply committed pioneers who were open to the richness of other living traditions, change did happen!

One such pioneer was the Rev. Dr. Stanley J. Samartha, a product of the Basel Evangelical Mission and the first person from the Tulunadu who ventured out to have serious dialogue with people of other faiths. His father, a respected clergy member, and his mother, a committed school teacher, instilled in him love and respect for all the children of God, irrespective of their faith. Though Samartha was raised in the mission compound, he writes, "My close friends in the primary school in the little village of Perdur were two Hindus and two Muslims - one the son of

¹ Tulunadu is the coastal region of Karnataka where the Tulu Language is primarily spoken.

a cobbler who supplied leather pouches for our catapults free of charge. I have kept in touch with them over the years, visiting the village during my travels to India from Geneva.”²

Interestingly, in Dr. Samartha’s address to the 1973 plenary session of the Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, he gave a clarion call in this arena by claiming:

What we need today is a theology that is not less but more true to God by being generous and open, a theology not less but more loving toward the neighbour by being friendly and willing to listen, a theology that does not separate us from our fellow human beings but supports us in our common struggles and hopes. As we live together with our neighbours, what we need today is a theology that refuses to be impregnable, but which, in the spirit of Christ, is both ready and willing to be vulnerable.³

Though his statement was made in 1973, Samartha held true to his words "willing to be vulnerable"⁴ throughout his life in his vocation as a pastor, scholar, and theologian. It was this spirit in Samartha that led him to explore how Hindu thinkers had responded to the work of Christ, resulting in one of his earlier books, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*⁵ in which he examines this aspect critically and seriously. Reflecting on the writing of this book, Samartha laments:

When it was typed and bound I showed it to a well-known theologian from South Asia. He turned a few pages of the contents, moved his jaw up and down several times, handed the volume back to me without a word of comment and walked away. I was utterly disappointed and immediately had a feeling that perhaps the book was not worth publishing.⁶

Samartha continues to write:

About this time Horst Burkle, professor of mission at the University of Munich, was visiting Bangalore. He had a keen interest in Asian Christian theology and came to see me. Seeing the bound volume in my study, he looked at the table of contents and immediately asked whether he could take it with him, have it translated and get it published in German. Without hesitation I agreed. This is why the German edition, *Hindus vor dem universalen Christus* was published (by Evangelisches Verlagswerk in Stuttgart) before the English.⁷

² Samartha, Stanley J., *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 4.

³ *The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures, and Ideologies*, in *The Holy Spirit*, Dow Kirkpatrick (Ed.), (Nashville, Tennessee, U.S.A., 1974) 37-38.

⁴ *The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures, and Ideologies*, in *The Holy Spirit*, 38.

⁵ Samartha, Stanley J., *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ: Towards A Christology in India* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1974).

⁶ Samartha, Stanley J., *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 21-22.

⁷ Samartha, *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*, 22.

His student and successor as the Director of Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies at the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr. S. Wesley Ariarajah, observes:

In the history of the Ecumenical Movement Samartha would be remembered as the pioneer in the field of Interfaith Dialogue and the founding Director of the Sub-Unit on Dialogue. He began a ministry, deeply controversial at that time, which has become the cutting edge issue of our day. He served the cause of this ministry well by taking the time, having the patience, and expending the energy necessary to build it on firm foundations. So when the rains came down and the floods rose the house never fell because it was built on the rock.⁸

In his own words, Samartha writes:

During my very first week on the WCC staff, I was standing in the lunch line in the cafeteria when a booming voice behind me asked, 'Are you the Indian theologian recently appointed to promote syncretism in the World Council of Churches?' A few days later, in a staff meeting, when I used the phrase, 'wider ecumenism,' a senior colleague immediately interrupted me: 'We do not use such phrases at the Ecumenical Centre.' I had been 'rapped on the knuckles,' and I recognized that caution was necessary.⁹

Speaking about 'rapped on the knuckles,'¹⁰ a few years later at the 1975 Assembly of the World Council of Churches, the debate on the floor on the subject of interfaith dialogue as observed by Dr. Konrad Raiser:

...will be remembered as one of the crucial moments in the life of the World Council. The opposition, particularly from delegates representing European churches, and the passionate defence of the report by Asian delegates, made the assembly and the ecumenical community as a whole aware of the fundamental challenge to the traditional Christian self-understanding which is implied in the dialogue approach.¹¹

Following the controversial moments at the 1975 Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, the continuation of interfaith dialogue seemed questionable. It was Samartha's leadership and his articulation of theology made the World Council of Churches not only adopt the "Guidelines for Dialogue" at the 1979 meeting but also gave interfaith dialogue a firmer foundation. After I defended my Ph.D. dissertation "Stanley J. Samartha's Contribution to

⁸ Ariarajah, S. Wesley, *Some Glimpses into the Theology of Dr. Stanley Samartha*, *Current Dialogue*, 38, December 2001 (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 16.

⁹ Samartha, Stanley J., *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*, 29.

¹⁰ Samartha, Stanley J., *Between Two Cultures: Ecumenical Ministry in a Pluralist World*, 29.

¹¹ Raiser. Konrad, *Tribute to Dr. Stanley J. Samartha*, *Current Dialogue*, 38, December 2001 (Geneva: World Council of Churches), 13.

the Interfaith Dialogue,”¹² one of my Ph.D. Dissertation Committee members, Dr. Pieter de Jong, asked me whether Samartha's understanding of interfaith dialogue and the theology behind it would ever become a topic of interest in the United States and elsewhere. My answer to Dr. de Jong was, as I mentioned in my dissertation, “Samartha is prophet ahead of his time,”¹³ and I am confident that his works and thoughts will be appreciated one day, even in the west. Even until his death, he continued to develop his theology of interfaith dialogue and to sharpen its theological edge. In one of my visits to his house in Bangalore, Samartha told me I was the first one to write a dissertation on him, and others had followed me. He was grateful for my work. He further indicated that he had taken seriously the constructive criticisms and concerns I raised in my dissertation and was addressing them in his forthcoming book. Reflecting on his statement, I believe that he was referring to this particular comment in my dissertation:

Since Samartha makes it clear that Christ is not God, he cannot pray to Christ directly. However, if he maintains this understanding of a theocentric Christology, he can pray to God through Christ. It does make it difficult, however, for him to pray with his own church, the church of South India, which in its liturgy of the Holy Communion includes¹⁴ ‘O Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.¹⁵

Deeply touched by his comments and humbled by his words, I began to closely follow his subsequent writings. Samartha continued to challenge the church in general, his home church, and the church of South India in their practice of theology at the grass roots level, challenging both clergy and laity to develop theocentric Christology in building up the community of God's *shalom*. In his articulation of theocentric Christology, he is very clear that Christ our Lord and Savior wants us to partake in the Kingdom of God, and Christ challenges us to build the Kingdom as his followers. In the development of his “theocentric Christology,” Samartha is very passionate in advocating the idea that Christ himself did not demand people to give their allegiance to him but pointed them to glorify and witness to God who sent Jesus to his ministry. Samartha challenges his readers to follow Jesus Christ as his disciples in extending the Kingdom of God on this earth along with people of other faiths without losing our Christian witness. He continuously challenged his fellow Christians to give up the mission compound mentality with which they had been raised. Perhaps nowhere in his writings has Dr. Samartha claimed it more boldly than at an address given to a group of students, teachers, and parents belonging to various faith communities. He said:

¹² Devadhar, Sudarshana, *Stanley J. Samartha's Contribution to the Interfaith Dialogue*, Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to Drew University, Madison, NJ, 1987.

¹³ Devadhar, Sudarshana, 226.

¹⁴ Devadhar, Sudarshana, 199.

¹⁵ The Book of Common Worship: The Church of South India (Madras, Oxford University Press, 1979), 18, quoted in Sudarshana Devadhar, *Stanley J. Samartha's Contribution to the Interfaith Dialogue*, Ph.D. Dissertation submitted to Drew University, Madison, NJ, 1987, 199.

Now, I speak as an Indian Christian. But let me make it clear that there are resources in the faiths of our neighbours as well that provide both the means to crack the cake of tradition and to fertilise the grass that emerges in the cracks. I openly acknowledge the fact that in this audience of parents, teachers and students, there are people who belong to different religious traditions - Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh and perhaps others as well. In a country like ours which has been and still continues to be multi-religious in character for a much longer time in history than any other country in the world, it is both unwise and irresponsible to believe that *only one* religion has the resources to contribute to emergence of the new.¹⁶

Though I am very appreciative of the Christian missionaries who brought the gospel to India, and without whose presence and ministry my ancestors would not have experienced the joy, liberation, and transformation offered by Christ, confining newly converted Christians on a mission compound and barring them from enjoying and experiencing the resources of other faiths without losing their Christian witness has denied an opportunity for Protestant Christians in Tulunadu to participate in the extension work of the Reign of God in a meaningful way. The arrogance that believes the mission compound is the only sacred space and everything else is not has denied opportunities for Christians to be in true pilgrimage with people of other faiths. To do this effectively, however, to bring the new Pentecost into our communities, we need to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and to claim that the Holy Spirit is not confined to the mission compounds of the world but may be found outside the walls of mission compounds as well. As Samartha states:

To discern the movement of the Spirit not only in the church but also in the communities of people outside the visible boundaries of the church is perhaps the most challenging demand of our time. Wherever the fruits of the Spirit are to be found - 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control' (Gal 5:22) - whether in the lives of Christians or neighbours of other faiths, is not the Spirit of God present? These are visible and readily recognizable signs which do not need elaborate theological investigations. Paul writes: 'Against such, there is no law' (Gal 5:22).¹⁷

He further augments this thought when he writes:

In a pluralistic world, it is indeed necessary for Christians, as members of the Church, to openly affirm and declare the Lordship and Saviourhood of Jesus Christ. The christological substance of Christian faith should be unmistakably clear. Once this is

¹⁶ Samartha, S. J., *The Pilgrim Christ: Sermons, Poems, Bible Stories*, (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1994), 38.

¹⁷ Samartha, Stanley J., *The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths*, in Castro, Emilio (Compiler), *To the Wind Of God's Spirit: Reflections on the Canberra Theme*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), 60-61.

affirmed, the 'onlyness' of Christian parochialism should not prevent people from accepting the 'manyness' of God's love and concern for all humanity.¹⁸

As one reflects on the works of Samartha, one needs to agree with theologian, Rev. Dr. J. Jayakiran Sebastian, who claims:

Given the reality that in places like India, the laboratory of dialogue, where all kinds of exciting things have and continue to happen, but also the place where horrible and destructive explosions have led to the tragic loss of life throughout her history, we need to understand that while attempts to look for certain commonalities and a shared vocabulary are all welcome and worthy pursuits, the honest interrogation of difference, perceptions of history, understandings of identity, limits of "toleration", and the majority-minority questions, along with the reality of believing and belonging, are all issues and themes that need renewed and concentrated attention today. The search of the lowest common denominator or the "essentials", while well-meant, seems to me to be misguided, and an honest recounting and interrogation of difference is an unrelenting and pressing task. What I find interesting is that when one unpacks concepts like the 'diversity of dialogue', one must reckon with the diversity of those who as individuals are often overlooked in discourses that tend to think in broad and almost comprehensive categories, rather than as much smaller units going down to the individual level, a process that unflinchingly can reckon with how individuals construct themselves religiously, not in a monolithic manner, but as those who have chosen to inhabit multiple religious worlds with varying degrees of comfort and security.¹⁹

Like Pieter de Jong, people may wonder if Samartha's theology is Utopian, practical, or real. Perhaps Samartha's prophecy has come to fruition in his own Tulunadu community as seen in the young millennial engineering student Vidushi Ruth Prithika Maben (hereafter referred to as Ruth), on Easter Day, Sunday, April 1, 2018 in the city of Mangalore, India. Ruth, the daughter of devout Christian professionals, was not born on a mission compound; she was raised outside the walls of a mission compound, in the midst of people of other faiths. She has, however, been a regular participant in the life of the Christian Church. With the help of her parents, she decided to learn the classical Indian dance Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam is a popular and widely known classical dance style of India. A form of storytelling and prayer, it dates to the Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu. Today, these dances have become more secular, allowing males and females to take part.

There are only a few Christian parents in Tulunadu who have encouraged their children to learn this classical dance, and there are many Christian circles critical of those who study it. This

¹⁸ Samartha, S. J., *One Christ - Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, Published in India by The South Asia Theological Research Institute, Bangalore, 1992), 175.

¹⁹ Sebastian, J. Jayakiran, personal email to Sudarshana Devadhar, July 10, 2018.

young millennial, Ruth, not only passed the highest examination in Bharatanatyam, but with the support of her parents and help of her teacher who is of Hindu faith, she decided to choreograph the Biblical creation story and the ministry, work, and passion of Jesus through Bharatanatyam. She titled it "Kristha Patha," translated "A Way of Christ."

In her own words, Ruth writes:

Kristha Patha for me is a performance with a difference. This is an appeal to ensure that traditional art forms of India are employed to disseminate spiritual values in society. The young and the not so young, in the present time, are too immersed in the fast moving, mechanical world and it is not an easy task to spread the true essence of religion among people. However, I firmly believe that if we succeed at evoking the finer sensibility of people, we will definitely attain the desired goal. As a Bharatanatyam danseuse, I was enthusiastic to share an idea that had been brewing in my mind for quite some time. With the support of my parents and my Guru, I was determined to use my prowess as a Bharatanatyam dancer to convey to the world the significance of the preaching of Jesus Christ. I sincerely believed that this would be reflective of the global trend, when borders have shrunk, the east has mingled with the west and the perception with regard to art forms has grown broader and healthier. I was blessed with an enriching experience of using my talent to spread the word of the Lord on Easter Sunday, the 1st of April 2018. The hard work and dedication of my parents, family and friends has been commendable throughout my dancing journey. I owe the success of this project to the recording artistes and my Guru who have ensured that the items are specially composed and choreographed in deep veneration to the Almighty.²⁰

In the history of the Protestant Christian Community of Tulunadu, Ruth is the first Protestant layperson to make a breakthrough in this arena. Unwittingly, what Ruth did was make the concept of theocentric theology a practical reality when she made a presentation of the "Kristha Patha" through Bharatanatyam on Easter, 2018 at the Town Hall of Mangalore, India.

Following the presentation of Kristha Patha, Ruth shared with one of the interviewers:

Kristha Patha is a unique Bharatanatyam recital based on the Biblical themes of faith, hope, and love shown by Jesus Christ himself to mankind. The repertoire begins with a Pushpanjali based on the seven days of creation, followed by the birth of Jesus, His ministries, His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. It ends with a message that the risen Christ continues to dwell in the hearts of mankind, guiding them in the path of righteousness. All the dance compositions are within the frame work of a Bharatanatyam Margam. Fresh mudras created to depict Jesus and his symbolism was indeed satisfying. All five parts were carefully created in accordance with the Natya

²⁰ Maben, Ruth Prithika, personal email to Sudarshana Devadhar, July 8, 2018.

Kala and culture-defining a spiritual path too. Padam was from John's Gospels and Kirthana depicted genuinely the feelings of the Samaritan woman by the well and was a moving experience. Thillana was very special and spellbinding taken from Mark: Chapter 16 of the Bible. The scope for variations is vast from the Bible.²¹

Ruth's teacher, Vidushi Smt. Vidyashree Radhakrishna, who was raised in a Hindu tradition, shared the following profound words about this historical presentation of Kristha Patha:

I love challenges. This performance, created using the narration in the Holy testaments, shows the vastness of Indian classical dance forms. The basic idea of classical dance forms is story telling. It isn't restricted to any religion since I strongly believe Bharatanatyam is in itself a language. In this show 'Kristha Patha' the biggest challenge was that unlike depicting Shiva and Krishna, whose mudras are mentioned in Bharatanatyam, I had to create Mudras and costumes suiting Jesus. We had to start from scratch. We were able to do it, and I am glad people appreciated it. I am proud of Ruth Prithika since she gave a marvelous performance.²²

Unfortunately, an important part of the Kristha Patha interview by the Daijiworld,²³ is in Kannada language which restricts the English-speaking world to view it. In this powerful interview, both Ruth and Vidya makes some powerful statements about the historical presentation of Kristha Patha, which would not have happened if a Bharatanatyam guru from a Hindu tradition had not been willing to cooperate with her disciple from a Protestant Christian tradition. In this amazing television interview, when asked about how exactly she conceptualized this new concept of bringing the Bible to Bharatanatyam, Vidushi Vidya Radhakrishna shares:

It was Ruth's father who is a physician but with in-depth knowledge of the Scripture provided me the necessary frame work and it was with his guidance I did study the Bible and it helped me to conceptualize and choreograph the whole theme of the dance which extends from creation to resurrection.²⁴

As one reflects on the words of student (shishya) and teacher (guru), coming from two different religious traditions, one sees they were able to accomplish what they did because they took the

²¹ Dsouza, Alfie, Team Mangalorean, April 3, 2018, " Bharatanatyam Act on ' Easter' Episodes by Lass Ruth Prithika Enthralls Packed Hall," taken from <http://www.mangalorean.com/bharatanatyam-act-on-easter-episodes-by-lass-ruth-prithika-enthralls-packed-hall/>

²² Dsouza, Alfie, April 3, 2018.

²³ Christapata bharatanaatya, Special interview with Ruth Prithika Vidya Radhakrishna http://skymovies.club/christapata-bharatanaatyaaspecial-interview-with-ruth-prithika-vidya-radhakrishna_HZgLhfYQZo.html

²⁴ Christapata bharatanaatya, Special interview with Ruth Prithika Vidya Radhakrishna http://skymovies.club/christapata-bharatanaatyaaspecial-interview-with-ruth-prithika-vidya-radhakrishna_HZgLhfYQZo.html

challenge of telling the story of creation and sharing the message of the Christian gospel using the language of Bharatanatyam, hitherto untouched by the Christian community in Tulunadu. In order to accomplish this, both of them had to risk embracing the unknown, fully trusting that the language of God is the same, whether one is Hindu, Christian, or from any other faith..

Undoubtedly, exploration of the language of God in Bharatanatyam and the Christian gospel by Vidushis Ruth and Vidayshree has clearly demonstrated, the 'manyness' of God's love and concern for all of humanity. It is very exciting that this performance happened on Easter Day before an audience representing different faiths who were able to witness "Kristha Patha."

One would be doing an injustice to the entire presentation of Kristha Patha if no attention were given to how people of various faith traditions responded to it:

Inaugurating the show 'Kristha Patha,' Bishop of Mangaluru diocese Dr. Aloysius Paul D'Souza said, 'This is indeed a unique Bharatanatyam repertoire based on Biblical themes of faith, hope and love shown by Jesus Christ himself to mankind, performed with grace and poise by Ruth Prithika. She has gracefully showcased through her Bharatanatyam performances the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. We all need to commend Ruth for her talents and she is no doubt an inspiration for all of us.'²⁵

[Retired Bishop CSI Karnataka Southern Diocese] Rev. Dr. C. L. Furtado who gave a touching picture of Vidushi Ruth as she grew to this level before his very eyes over the years said that indeed this is a gift of God and endorsed and reiterated the Indian perfection in Christianity.²⁶

According to Arehole Sadashiva Rao who heads a foundation for the promotion of arts and culture:

If one can imbibe the great values embedded in the teachings of Rama, Rahim and Jesus in one's own heart and mind, the communal disharmony will be automatically converted into communal harmony but this is not an easy task to see and accept the values of each religion in a multilingual society. This is a big challenge but only the art forms like Bharatanatyam can take up this challenge and make people think in this way. Vid. Ruth Prithika took up this challenge successfully and proved that through this form of art, we can proclaim the truth involved in one God-many names and forms, without

²⁵ Dsouza, Alfie, April 3, 2018.

²⁶ I J Saldana- Shet, Bharatanatyam based on Bible ' Kristha Patha' A unique Bharatanatyam recital on the Biblical themes of faith, hope and love shown by Jesus Christ himself to mankind," Mangalore Today, Volume 22, Issue 3, May 2018, 36.

hurting the feelings of any section of the society and also within the framework of traditional Bharatanatyam.²⁷

Eminent Bharatanatyam performer and dance critic, Rahidka Shetty, writes:

Kristha Patha, true to its name, was an attempt in Bharatanatyam to depict Biblical themes of faith, hope and love shown by Jesus Christ himself, to mankind. The compositions were in the framework of the Bharatanatyam margam.

Kristha Patha gave the essence of the Bible - from creation to resurrection. And it being premiered on Easter Sunday, the day Jesus Christ was resurrected, was like the icing on the cake. It was a novel attempt by both the guru and her protégé since all the compositions were specifically penned and composed for this production.²⁸

Theologian Dr. Gladson Jathanna writes:

I prefer to call it a 'Daiva-Nritya' (Theo-dance) as in the same line of Theopoesy (Daiva-Kavya). As Theopoesy is a creative expression of the Divine in the form of Poems, Ruth's Kristha-Patha, the Daiva-Nritya is a unique way of witnessing to Christ, the Divine through Bharatanatyam. It is a creative and sensual expression of Christian faith, especially in the context of Christian witness in Karnataka. The place of the Body of the dancer in Kristha-Patha, in my opinion, has a theological significance. For example, in Pushpanjali, the body of the dancer is bent to the earth signifying the total surrender to the Creator. Likewise in Padam the dancer expresses through her bodily movements (Aangika Abhinaya) the feeling and manifestation of Love, the Divine, so powerfully and passionately. Such passion and submission to the Divine through body is what makes Kristha-Patha a Daiva-Nritya, the Theo-dance...Moreover, in my opinion, Ruth's attempt adds a new chapter to the Indian Christian Theology making a powerful conversation between a Divine-talk and an authentic traditional Indian art form.²⁹

Reflecting on the entire Kristha Patha, the careful preparation for it, the keenness with which Scriptures were studied and interpreted, one has to agree that Ruth, with the help of her teacher, has touched the unpaved roads of India in developing a new theology, in extending the work of the Kingdom of God in a new way, not in isolation, but in participation with people of other faiths. It is not a theology from above, but a theology with the people of other faiths outside the walls of the church, and it is a theology from the margins. Perhaps by doing this, Ruth has enabled the Protestant Christian community to embark on a new journey of building peace, harmony, and love in this world by inviting people of other faiths and no faith to invent and

²⁷"Ruth Prithika Theredhitta 'Krista Patha'," *Prajawani*, April 20, 2018. (Translated from Kannada to English)

²⁸Kristha Patha: A Bharatanatyam margam on Christ, April 16, 2018,

<http://www.narthaki.com/info/rev18/rev2185.html>

²⁹Taken from a personal Whatsapp message sent by Dr. Gladson Jathanna to Bishop Sudarshana Devadhar on Sunday, July 8, 2018.

experience God-language in a new way (To experience for yourself some highlights from the performance, visit <https://youtu.be/8l1iW5Tsj1w>).

Unbeknownst to her, Ruth may have inspired the people of her community to explore the “bullock-cart christology” as expressed by Samartha. He writes:

The old debate about a christology from 'above' and 'a christology from below' becomes thrustingly relevant here. In its attempts to land on the religiously plural terrain of Asia a *helicopter* christology makes such a lot of missiological noise and kicks up so much theological dust that people around are prevented from hearing the voice and seeing the vision of the descending divinity. A *bullock-cart* christology, on the other hand, has its wheels always in touch with the unpaved roads of Asia, for without that continuing friction with the ground the cart cannot move at all. Moreover, a bullock-cart Christology has the advantage of having its bullocks move on at a steady pace even when the driver sometimes falls asleep.³⁰

I cannot help but comment on a fascinating book on my desk by David McAllister-Wilson, *A New Church and a New Seminary: Theological Education is the Solution*. Though this book covers many of the ingredients required for practicing theology in a new way, it claims we need new apologetics in the areas “1. The Nature of the authority of the Bible... 2. Science and Religion... 3. Interfaith Dialogue.”³¹ McAllister-Wilson says, “Apologetics prepares clergy to engage an indifferent and even hostile mission field”³² He refers to “Millennials as the Disruptive Innovation”³³ because “1. Millennials Are Searching for a Deep and Authentic Faith... 2. Millennials Want to Save the World, Not the Church... [and] 3. Millennials Have Moved Beyond the Faith versus Works Debate.”³⁴ After pointing out that millennials will soon represent the largest portion of clergy, McAllister-Wilson makes the statement, “Instead of asking: ‘How can we attract millennials?’ we will be asking, “What kind of church will millennials lead?”³⁵.

I cannot help but emphasize that Church mission compounds will not save us and protect us. “...what we need today is a theology that refuses to be impregnable, but which, in the spirit of Christ, is both ready and willing to be vulnerable”³⁶

³⁰ Samartha, S. J., *One Christ-Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books. Published in India by The South Asia Theological Research Institute, 1992, p. ix

³¹ McAllister-Wilson, David, *A New Church and a New Seminary: Theological Education is the Solution* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), pp 101-102

³² McAllister-Wilson, David, 101

³³ McAllister-Wilson, David, 74

³⁴ McAllister-Wilson, David, 74-76

³⁵ McAllister-Wilson, David, 74

³⁶ *The Holy Spirit and People of Various Faiths, Cultures, and Ideologies*, in *The Holy Spirit*, 38.

Additionally, in the spirit of the working group on interreligious studies of the Fourteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, I need to conclude this paper by asking in what ways Vidushi Ruth Prithika Maben has answered the challenge posed by this group:

Theological studies can no longer engage in interreligious studies only out of interdisciplinary interest; it also needs to explore the intertextual and intercultural makeup of the Christian scripture and the faith it witnesses to, recognizing that Christianity from the initial stages was profoundly affected by Judaism and that the global spread of Christianity resulted in intercultural interpretations of the Gospel message.³⁷

Undoubtedly Ruth, with the help of her teachers, has interpreted the marks of the Christian Scripture and the faith it witnesses to by using the riches of Bharatanatyam. As a millennial Christian not raised in a mission compound, but in the midst of her friends from various faith communities, she has proven that Christians can participate in bringing harmony and God's shalom into our broken communities by inviting and challenging others to invent a new God language and participate in extending the Reign of God. Additionally, she has answered a question raised by another Tulunadu theologian and missiologist, Rt. Rev. Dr. C.L. Furtado, who was present at the presentation of Kristha Patha and commented elsewhere:

Considering the great contributions of missionaries to social change, economic development, basic research in languages, literature, culture and folklore, non-Christian scholars raise the question as to the motives for their social and cultural pursuits. Were they motivated by academic interest or by some humanitarian concern or were their social engagements and studies only means to an end, namely conversion? Today, when Hindu fundamentalism is on the rise, this question is raised emphatically. Anti-Christian forces assert that all the social services done by Christian missionaries is tainted by the motive to convert the illiterate, poor and ignorant sections of Indian society. In my opinion the problem lies in our failure to express clearly the relationship between evangelistic preaching and *diaconia*, between mission and evangelism and between the Church and the Kingdom of God.³⁸

May the disruptive innovation of Vidushi Ruth Prithika Maben continue to create glows of spiritual spark and light in the spirit of, to name a few, Mahatma Gandhi, St. Teresa of Kolkata, and Nelson Mandela in building oneness in all the children of God. May we witness the building of communities of shalom in all parts of the world irrespective of where one is born and raised, so people of all colors, religions, and creeds work toward peaceable societies, borrowing and learning from one another's God language.

³⁷ Taken from the working group of Interreligious studies on the website of the Fourteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, <https://oxford-institute.org/next-meeting/groups/>

³⁸ Bishop Christopher Furtado, "Mission As Restoration Of Humanity" *In The Precious Name*, Edited by Douglas Ruffle and Nicola Mulligan, Toms River, NJ, Jersey Shore Press, 2011, p 270

