

2.a. *Nodi*



# African American and Dalit Interpretations of the Bible: A Way of Socio-Political Innovation

73

Leo Lefebure - Debora Tonelli

*Abstract* – Traditionally speaking, the combination of religion and innovation – or *religio et novitas* – is very problematic. The aim of this paper is to show biblical interpretation as a possible tool for «social innovation», or rather in situations where a change in social practices derives from a radical change in mentality and in the values to which it gives rise. The possibility of Biblical interpretation having an effect on society bears on two kinds of question: on the one hand, regarding the contents of the Biblical narrative; on the other hand, religious images have the power to effect a transformation of values that promote social change. To show this, the paper analyses the role of the interpretation of Gen 9:20-27 in the origin of racism with regard to African-Americans in North America and to Dalits in India. As we will see, it is not the narrative content of the Biblical text that authorizes a line of interpretation, but rather the readers are the ones who attribute a meaning to the text because of perceived needs in their situations, which are extraneous to the biblical text.

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show biblical interpretation as a possible tool for «social innovation», to use a contemporary turn of phrase. Traditionally speaking, the combination of these two ideas – religion and innovation, or *religio et novitas* – is very problematic<sup>1</sup>. For this reason,

---

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between religion and innovation has a long history and has been studied in different ways. A historical reconstruction is offered in G. Constable - G. Cracco - H. Keller - D. Quaglioni (eds.), *Il secolo XII: la «renovatio» dell'Europa cristiana* (Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento. Quaderni, 62), Il Mulino, Bologna 2003. Both concepts, religion and innovation - are referred to social environment. Starting from the theory of socialization, the sociologist of religion Peter L. Berger attributes a double role to religion: on one side, religion legitimates the social order; on the other side, in the name of justice, religion plays a critical role on it. «Religion legitimates social institutions by bestowing upon them an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference ... Religious legitimations arise from human activity, but once crystallized into complexes of meaning that become part of a religious tradition they can attain a measure of autonomy as against this activity. Indeed, they

we prefer to use «social innovation» as language for a retrospective look back to the past, appealing to a knowledge that is able to generate new values and to equip processes to facilitate a new social organization<sup>2</sup>.

In this paper we have set a limited goal, to analyze the role that biblical interpretation has played in the origin and criticism of racism against North American blacks and in the interpretation of the caste system in India. Our analysis is limited to the role of some biblical verses, Gen 9:20-27. In each of these social political processes, textual interpretation of these verses has played an important role, contributing to a profound change in the thinking of a social group to the point of altering its organization. This has been possible because biblical interpretation has contributed to an interpretation of the actual reality and has constructed a new image of the world that is desired, and suggested means of achieving it<sup>3</sup>. As we will see, it has been a matter of an interpretation for the most part transmitted orally, that has been able to spread across different popular social strata and to influence their religious imaginations. A short summary of some of the significant moments in biblical interpretation will be followed by a discussion whose purpose is to clarify some of the characteristics we consider as relevant for the purposes of our discussion.

---

may then *act back upon* actions in everyday life, transforming the latter, sometimes radically», in P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canoy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, New York, Anchors Book Doubleday, 1967, p. 34 and p. 41. The religion is therefore characterized by the tension between conservation and innovation. This tension contributes to the social changes.

<sup>2</sup> In recent decades the concept of innovation has been used in very different areas, at the risk, sometimes, of becoming a religion in its own right, at other times being used in a rhetorical sense. Since we are not social scientists, we will just take note of the definition of innovation given by the editor of *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in its inaugural issue, in which social innovation is defined as «the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems». This idea is mainly applied to the area of business, introducing the concept of social responsibility. In a wider sense, «innovation» is «a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals». J.A. Phills Jr. - K. Deiglmeier - D.T. Miller, *Rediscovering Social Innovation*, in «Stanford Innovation review», Fall 2008, [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/rediscovering\\_social\\_innovation](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/rediscovering_social_innovation). B. Godin - D. Vinck (eds.), *Critical Studies of Innovation. Alternative Approaches to the Pro-Innovation Bias*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar, 2017, especially pp. 1-14.

<sup>3</sup> The relevant studies are numerous. We only note that of M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York, Basic Books, 1985, and that of B. Lincoln (ed.), *Religion Rebellion Revolution. An Interdisciplinary and Cross-Cultural Collection of Essays*, New York, St. Martin Press, 1985. R.S. Sugirtharaja, *The Bible and Empire. Postcolonial Exploration*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, especially pp. 144-191.

## 2. Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical interpretation begins in the oral proclamation of traditions and continues through the sacred text<sup>4</sup>. What is given by scripture is not as self-evident as religious fundamentalism would have us believe. The words, their correlation, their literary and historical context of use, questions of authorship and audience, are all factors that contribute to the complexity of the text. Besides the text is susceptible of different reading approaches (philological, pastoral, historical etc.), none of which can claim to exhaust its meaning. Besides, from a faith perspective, the Word of God is expressed in human language, in a cultural, historical and political situation, and we cannot prescind from this particularity. Awareness of this has been hard work, it has taken time, and has been achieved only in relatively recent times. However, in general, every period has developed its own interpretative methods for the sacred text, with the purpose either of explaining that text or of replying to the questions of that period: the experience of the individual and of the community has been mediated and made intelligible by means of the interpretation of the Word of God. It provides the interpretative key for reading the present and for putting it into a perspective where it can find a deeper meaning. In the face of injustice and human suffering, the biblical testimony denies that there is no more to be said, because human destiny has to find its fulfillment elsewhere. The possibility of finding oneself in the text, and the meaning of hope in the text which it conveys, have allowed the awareness of the Hebrew people to transform itself into the awareness of other peoples and to initiate radical social change.

In the course of the centuries, many methods of biblical interpretation have been adopted, but the Renaissance was when, thanks to the influence of classical texts, the Bible began to be read as if it was like any other classical text. In the 17th century, the process of rationalization of the sciences had wide repercussions on the interpretation of biblical texts and reason became the principle instrument of analysis. The biblical text was analyzed like any other literary text, without hiding its contradictions and internal incongruences. This allowed the interpretative monopoly of the text by Church hierarchy to be challenged, and prompted scholars of other disciplines to grapple with biblical interpre-

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.- L. Ska, *Introduzione alla lettura del Pentateuco. Chiavi di lettura per i primi cinque libri della Bibbia*, Bologna, EDB, 1998; D. Tonelli, *Note di metodologia biblica*, in «Annali di Studi Religiosi», 11, Bologna, EDB, 2010, pp. 87-105 [https://books.fbkc.eu/media/pubblicazioni/allegati/Debora\\_Tonelli\\_87-105.pdf](https://books.fbkc.eu/media/pubblicazioni/allegati/Debora_Tonelli_87-105.pdf)

tation. Hobbes, Spinoza and Simon are among the initiators of this new chapter, which created new forms of engagement between the sacred text and politics, law and classical studies. However, the use of reason did not impede, indeed in some cases it even encouraged textual interpretations favorable to racism, and contributed to laying the scientific foundations of white superiority over black. This is also the age of the development of the so-called «curse of Ham» as a justification of the enslavement of people from Africa.

The use of reason as the only tool for textual research determined the successive development of biblical hermeneutics. Scholars like Gottlob C. Storr, founder of the 'old Tübingen school of theology', and Johann S. Semler, supporter of Enlightenment theological criticism, are exponents of different styles that characterize the Enlightenment climate that was gradually emerging and they exerted a certain influence on the young Hegel<sup>5</sup>. Reason and textual criticism on one side, together with both Hegel's philosophy of religion and Romanticism, were the instruments with which Julius Wellhausen developed his documentary theory. This exercised a great influence on the whole of exegesis in the 20th century, and the Church often turned to the hermeneutical question, also influenced by the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The importance of the cultural and historical context and of literary criticism has been sustained both alongside the possibility of using several methods of textual analysis of the Bible. One of the most debated themes has undoubtedly been the relationship between the original sources of the text and its final form, in relation to the importance of the latter, but also that between the text and the reader. Gadamerian hermeneutics proves the insufficiency of reason, which deceives itself about understanding and possessing the object of its research, when it comes to life only in the relationship it has with the subject<sup>6</sup>.

In the course of the last centuries, by the use of the tools of literary criticism, biblical hermeneutics has shown the importance of the social, historical, cultural and political context in which the sacred text emerged. However, this has not prevented racial prejudices from shaping historical criticism and modern science. Concomitantly with an elitist and educated interpretation of the biblical tradition, an oral tradition has

<sup>5</sup> Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings* (original English translation, Chicago IL, University of Chicago Press, 1948), reprint University of Pennsylvania Press 1996 (ed. orig. *Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr, 1907).

<sup>6</sup> H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, Bloomsbury USA Academic, 2013.

continued, which has sought to respond above all to immediate issues, using biblical stories to explain the present<sup>7</sup>.

The analysis of racism and of the caste system discussed in this contribution shows how biblical interpretation has been (and remains) an element within Christian communities that determines the diffusion, affirmation, justification, or rejection of racism and of caste divisions. Indeed, religion with its system of practices and beliefs is capable of elaborating a social and political critique that is able to create new ways of thinking as well as of putting them into practice.

### 3. African American and Dalit Interpretations of the Bible

While the ancient world of the Bible was structured by social hierarchies, it did not have conceptions of race and caste in the sense that these notions developed in early modern Europe and America and in ancient India. Nonetheless, in North America and India, notions of race and caste exerted enormous influence on the interpretation of the Bible and the practice of Christian faith, with ambiguous results. Readers brought their perceptions of race and caste status to biblical texts, particularly with reference to Gen 9:25-27. Some discovered biblical support for forms of systematic discrimination; others found a biblical basis for social critique and innovation. It should be noted that social innovation, like biblical interpretation, is not always good<sup>8</sup>. The North American development of racialized slavery with biblical backing in the 17th and 18th centuries marked at the beginning one of the most influential and far-reaching social innovations in all of recorded history. Nonetheless, other biblical interpreters found basis for social innovations that directly challenged the dominant racism of a slave-holding society. The situation was very

<sup>7</sup> This is particularly the case in African and Asian traditions, where the Christian message has been handed down in very different ancient traditions. A short reconstruction of the dialectic between African traditions and Biblical studies is provided by A.M. Mbuvi, *African Biblical Studies: An Introduction to an Emerging Discipline*, in «Currents in Biblical Research», 15, 2017, 2, pp. 149-178. J.-M. Éla, *My Faith as an African*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 1988 (reprint, Éugene OR, Wipf & Stock, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> The use of economic concepts to define the role of religion in public space has to be briefly clarified. In the economic context, «innovation» is «to renew something already existing» or «to change the function or aims of something», generating competition. Innovation is not «invention», but a way to re-new something pre-existing, it is a process of developing, capable of generating new values and of building a new social structure. For the history of «innovation», see B. Godin, *Innovation contested: The Idea of Innovation Over the Centuries*, London, Routledge, 2015. For the role of biblical interpretation in society, see: R.S. Segurtharaja, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001.

complex: as we will see in the course of the study, racism<sup>9</sup> and slavery did not have their origin in theory, but in a practical, that is, economic context. Only subsequently was a rational justification sought, using a Biblical hermeneutic and finally appealing to biological reasoning<sup>10</sup>. The efforts to bring about racial and social justice and equality in the United States and India have been among the most important efforts at constructive social innovation in the histories of their respective nations. Some have noted the analogy between black theologies in various contexts, including the United States, and Dalit theology<sup>11</sup>.

Biblical interpretations played an important role both in supporting racialized slavery in North America and also in opposing it and in challenging later racial discrimination. While the origins of the caste system in India lie outside of the biblical tradition, Christians in India have often accommodated themselves to perceptions and policies based on caste identities. In recent decades, biblical interpretation has played an important role in the development of Christian Dalit theology. We will review selected aspects of the troubled and tragic history of Christian biblical interpretation and racial relations in America and also of the development of Dalit-inspired interpretations of the Bible in India. In these historical examples, biblical interpretation plays a critical role in the societies, often in an ambiguous way: supporting or criticizing values and social actions. From our point of view, two issues are interesting: the first is the need to legitimate values and socio-political actions within a religious horizon; the second is the role of social criticism of religion.

<sup>9</sup> As we will see, the idea of «racism» is wide and complex, changing over time. A reconstruction of racism from a socio-political view in the South is provided by Jeffrey D. Grynawski - M.C. Munger, *Reconstructing Racism: Transforming Racial Hierarchy from «necessary Evil» into «positive good»*, in «Social Philosophy and Policy», 34, 2017, 1, pp. 144-163. Some issues presented in this paper are common to racism in the North: the economic origin of racism, the tension between faith and slavery, the idea of superiority of «white», the need to justify the racism beyond economic benefits of slave' owners, the ambiguous interpretation of Enlightenment ideals.

<sup>10</sup> For the role of Biblicism, cf. M. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492- 1783*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2016. S. Perry, *Bible, Culture, and Authority in the Early United States*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> S.D. Kapoor, *Dalits and African Americans: A Study in Comparison*, Delhi, Kalpaz Publications, 2004; M. Gnanavaram, '*Dalit Theology' and the Parable of the Good Samaritan*', in «Journal for the Study of the New Testament», 50, 1993, pp. 59-83; here p. 66.



#### 4. Biblical Interpretation and Racial Relations in Colonial North America and the United States of America

Directly conflicting biblical interpretations have played contradictory roles among North America Christians in relation to racialized slavery. On the one hand, there are strong biblical principles for recognizing the equality of all persons. In principle, Christian faith calls its followers to respect every human life as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27). Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan in the Gospel of Luke makes clear that the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:31) applies to members of diverse communities that are disrespected or despised (Lk 10:25-37). Yet from colonial times to the present, Christians of European descent in North America have all too often embraced racist perspectives and have interpreted the Bible to support racist policies and practices. The result has been that North American Christians repeatedly sought biblical backing for forms of racial injustice. While much progress has been made over the years, the current turmoil concerning racial relations in America demonstrates that these issues are far from being resolved.

In the first English colonies in North America much of the labor was supplied by indentured servants from England<sup>12</sup>. They would come under a contract to labor for a set period of time and then would be free; they often would be promised either tools or land to start an independent living. In the middle and later part of the 17th century, it became more difficult to attract labor from England because of the Civil War and later the Great Fire of London. When English settlers tried to enslave Indians, they discovered that the Indians they could escape, and this practice made relations with Indian nations more difficult. As result, the English began importing enslaved Africans. After King Charles II returned to the throne of England in 1660, he authorized the Royal African Company to ship enslaved Africans to his colonies.

The enslavement of human beings in North America was not originally justified in racial terms, but during the latter part of the 17th century there occurred what historian Peter Wood has called «the terrible transformation»<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>12</sup> T.S. Kidd, *American Colonial History: Clashing Cultures and Faiths*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2016, pp. 85-197.

<sup>13</sup> P.H. Wood, *Strange New Land: Africans in Colonial America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 23-34. J. Kameron Carter, *Race; A Theological Account*, Oxford UK, Oxford University Press,

In the early 17th century in North America, settlers from England generally saw themselves as Christians and saw people from Africa as heathens. There was not yet a strong sense of identity based on the color of one's skin. During the course of the 17th century, lower class whites realized that they shared grievances with enslaved persons from Africa, and on occasion joined together in rebelling against the established authorities, as happened in a revolt in Virginia in 1676. The wealthy, land-owning elite and the colonial officers realized that such an alliance constituted a great threat to their dominance; therefore they implemented the practice of *Divide et impera* («Divide and rule»), developing white racism to lure lower class whites to align themselves with the land-owning whites. People from England began to identify themselves as «white» and to view American Indians as «red» and people from an African background as «black». Later immigrants from Asia would be labeled «yellow». The identity based on the color of one's skin was a tool to categorize «whites» as superior to Africans and African Americans. Afterwards, the practice of racialized slavery called for a theoretical and religious basis to justify it.

In this context, Americans began to interpret the narrative of Noah, Ham, and Canaan in the book of Genesis in a new light (Gen 9:20-27). According to Genesis, after the great flood Noah planted a vineyard, made wine, drank too much, and lay down naked in his tent, apparently in a drunken stupor. His son Ham looked upon him and then told his brothers Japheth and Shem about the situation. Respecting their father, Japheth and Shem took a garment and reportedly walked backwards into the tent to cover their father without looking upon him in his naked, shameful state. When Noah sobered up and learned of what happened, he cursed, not Ham, but rather Ham's son Canaan: «'Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.' He also said, 'Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. May God make space for Japheth, and let him live in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave» (Gen 9:25-27).

Many colonial Americans viewed Shem as the ancestor of Semitic peoples in the Middle East, Japheth as the ancestor of Europeans, and Ham as the ancestor of Africans. From this rather slender basis, some Christians developed a biblical justification for the enslavement and subordination

of all persons of African descent (Gen 9:20-27)<sup>14</sup>. However, in the text of Genesis, there is no stated reason for Canaan to be cursed for the misconduct of his father Ham. More importantly, the passage does not explicitly authorize what white Americans interpreted it to mean: there is no indication that all the descendants of Ham and Canaan were to be enslaved for centuries to come until the end of time. Nonetheless, white Americans repeatedly claimed to be the descendants of Japheth and cited this passage as justification for enslaving all persons of African heritage<sup>15</sup>.

It is crucial to note that the modern concept of race and the racialized valuation of skin color are not to be found in the biblical text. David M. Goldenberg has studied the origins of the interpretation of Genesis 9 in relation to people of African descent, concluding, «I found no indication of a negative sentiment towards Blacks in the Bible. Aside from its use in a proverb (found also among the Egyptians and Greeks), skin color is never mentioned in descriptions of biblical Kushites. Color did not matter»<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, Jon Levenson argues that physical characteristics including skin color were not significant in defining ethnicity in the biblical period<sup>17</sup>. Stephen R. Haynes notes that «Ham himself was rarely racialized before Europeans explored West Africa in the fifteenth century»<sup>18</sup>.

The English colonialists were not the first, however, to find justification for slavery in racist biblical interpretations. The power of the Biblical foundation derives from the role that the Bible played in American society beginning with Puritanism. A new era of racist biblical interpretation had begun in the 1450s, when the Portuguese author Gomes Eanes de Zurara wrote the *Crónica dos feitos da Guiné* in honor of Prince Henry and infamously cited Genesis 9 to justify the Portuguese practice of enslaving sub-Saharan Africans and bringing them to Europe. Zurara pondered the meaning of divine providence in granting the Portuguese dominion over the enslaved Africans, viewing the sufferings of Jesus as containing those of the enslaved Africans by offering hope for their

<sup>14</sup> There was enslavement of American Indians as well, though the large majority of enslaved persons were of African descent. See A. Reséndez, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America*, Boston - New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 496.

<sup>16</sup> D.M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 2003, p. 195.

<sup>17</sup> J.D. Levenson, *The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism*, in M.G. Brett (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Bible*, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996, p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> S.R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 34.

eternal salvation<sup>19</sup>. Zurara's theodicy for colonialism and slavery would have a long history of influence. Ibram X. Kendi stresses that Zurara's racist biblical interpretation arose in order to justify the practice of slavery and was not a cause for it: «Zurara's inaugural racist ideas, in other words, were a product of, not a producer of, Prince Henry's racist policies concerning African slave-trading»<sup>20</sup>. Similarly, in North America, Christians embraced racist biblical interpretations in order to rationalize the horrific abuses of racialized slavery.

However, not all North American Christians accepted the racist interpretations of Genesis 9, and the theological debate that ensued would be among the most important and tragic for American history. In 1700 Samuel Sewall, a Boston lawyer, pointedly noted that Noah's curse did not fall on Ham but rather on Canaan. Sewall argued the Canaan was not the ancestor of Africans at all but rather, as his name suggests, of the ancient Canaanites. Sewall stressed the decisive authority of the golden rule of Jesus as forbidding slavery<sup>21</sup>. In response, John Saffin, also a Boston lawyer, cited the precedents for slavery in the Hebrew Bible as alleged proof of its legitimacy. Saffin insisted that enslavement gave Africans the benefit of hearing the truth of Christian faith and accepting it, a rationalization that would have a long history of influence<sup>22</sup>. This debate continued for the next 150 years, with evangelical Protestants in particular probing questions of biblical hermeneutics and arguing over the principles for deciding which biblical texts had greater authority<sup>23</sup>.

For many African Americans, the First Great Awakening in the 1730s marked the moment when Christian faith began to appear as a liberating, live option. Powerful Protestant preachers Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and their colleagues presented a vivid personal experience of sin and grace as the core of Christian faith. Focusing strongly on personal experience, preachers of the Great Awakening fostered distrust of long established hierarchies. This religious enthusiasm and vivid emotions of the revival meetings appealed to enslaved Africans who found a resonance with their African heritage. Albert J. Raboteau comments:

---

<sup>19</sup> W.J. Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2010, pp. 15-24.

<sup>20</sup> I.X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, New York, Nation Books, 2016, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America*, p. 495.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> M.A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, Chapel Hill NC, University of North Carolina Press, p. 50.

«Drawing upon the worship traditions of Africa, as well as those of revivalistic Christianity, the slaves created services that resembled the spirit-empowered ceremonies of their African ancestors. Both traditions assumed that authentic worship required an observable experience of the divine presence»<sup>24</sup>.

African Americans emerged as preachers inspired by their own religious experience, and by the end of the 18th century, a tradition of African American Christianity was taking root. Often in an increasingly racist society, Christian communities were the only places where African Americans could exercise constructive roles of leadership. From this tradition emerged biblical interpretations that directly challenged the dominant racism of American society.

In the 19th century, African American leaders forcefully challenged the combination of racism and Christian faith. In 1831 Maria Stewart, an African American Christian leader who was an eloquent spokesperson for the rights of all, especially African American women, linked Christianity to the cause of freedom and challenged white Americans:

«Oh, America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against Thee ... You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt»<sup>25</sup>.

African Americans made sharp distinctions between authentic Christianity and what was being promoted by the dominant, racist European American leaders of the time. Most enslaved African Americans were not allowed to receive formal education, but they expressed a lively grasp of Christian faith in the spirituals. Often biblical images such as the freeing of the slaves in the Exodus or the crossing of the River Jordan appeared in song as images of liberation from slavery in America. The use of religious images allowed the imagination of a social reality different from the actual one and served as a driving force in social change. The great 20th century African American theologian Howard Thurman described the unshakable fundamental confidence of the spirituals:

<sup>24</sup> A.J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> M. Stewart, *Maria W. Stewart: America's First Black Woman Political Writer: Essays and Speeches*, edited and introduced by M. Richardson, Bloomington IN, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 38-39. See also A.J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, p. 35.

«God was the deliverer ... Daring to believe that God cared for them despite the cruel vicissitudes of life meant the giving of wings to life that nothing could destroy»<sup>26</sup>. The spirituals expressed faith in a God of freedom: «In God's presence at least there would be freedom; slavery is no part of the purpose or the plan of God. Man, therefore is the great enemy of man»<sup>27</sup>. Often the spirituals expressed a double meaning, one that would be apparent to the slaveholder and the other that would be recognized by those in chains. In the spirituals, African-Americans expressed their awareness that God was on their side:

«They know from cruel experience that the Christian ethic has not been sufficiently effective in the life of the Caucasian or the institutions he controls to compel him to treat the Negro as a fellow human being ... The Christian ethic and segregation must forever be at war with each other»<sup>28</sup>.

James Cone notes that the greatest danger to enslaved African-Americans was the destruction of their community. In the spirituals they faced this danger and expressed solidarity even in seemingly impossible situations:

«They attended to the present realities of despair and loneliness that disrupted the community of faith ... Thus it is the loss of community that constitutes the major burden. Suffering is not too much to bear, if there are brothers and sisters to go down in the valley to pray with you»<sup>29</sup>.

Cone adds:

«The actual physical brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison to the loss of the community. That was why most of the slave songs focused on 'going home.' Home was an affirmation of the need for community»<sup>30</sup>.

The spirituals reinterpreted the Bible from the perspective of those enslaved, trusting that God in some way shared in their suffering, affirmed their human dignity, and willed their liberation:

«The theological assumption of black slave religion as expressed in the spirituals was that slavery contradicts God, and God will therefore liberate black people. All else was secondary and complemented that basic perspective»<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> H. Thurman, *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Richmond IN, Friends United Press, 1990 (1975<sup>1</sup>), p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>29</sup> J. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1999, p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

Reflecting on the narrative of his eventful life, noted African American leader Frederick Douglass worried that readers might think he was rejecting Christian faith altogether, and so he offered a clarification in an appendix:

«What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slave-holding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference – so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other»<sup>32</sup>.

White racist attitudes survived the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, shaping the institution of the notorious Jim Crow Laws, which systematically discriminated against African Americans throughout the South. Racism also led to the establishment of a reign of terror through the lynching of African Americans. White Christians often combined their interpretation of Christian faith with discriminatory beliefs and practices; but even in the period of widespread lynching during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, African Americans continued to distinguish between Christian faith and the actions of European Americans who called themselves «Christian». Like the authors of the spirituals, African American artists during this period interpreted the Bible in relation to the experiences of African Americans; European American Christian leaders, however, were generally oblivious to the parallel between the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the repeated lynching of African Americans. Cone notes the irony that African American artists saw so clearly what European American Christian leaders could not:

«What enabled artists to see what Christian theologians and ministers would not? What prevented these theologians and ministers, who should have been the first to see God's revelation in black suffering, from recognizing the obvious gospel truth? Did it require such a leap of imagination to recognize the visual and symbolic overtones between the cross and the lynching tree, both places of execution in the ancient and modern worlds?»<sup>33</sup>.

Cone comments that singing, dancing, and shouting vividly expressed the paradoxical combination of «both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept blacks from going under, as they

<sup>32</sup> F. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and H. Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, New York, Modern Library, 2000, p. 107. See also D.W. Bright, *Frederick Douglass; Prophet of Freedom*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2018.

<sup>33</sup> J.H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 2011, p. 94.

struggled, against great odds, to acknowledge humanity denied»<sup>34</sup>. The challenge was daunting: «On the one hand, faith spoke to their suffering, making it bearable, while, on the other hand, suffering contradicted their faith, making it unbearable»<sup>35</sup>. While whites interpreted Christianity as supporting racist practices and perspectives, African Americans and American Indians repeatedly found support and hope in the promises of the gospel<sup>36</sup>. The situation at the present time continues to be ambiguous. Recent expressions of racism render all the more important the long African American tradition of finding life and hope in the biblical witness.

## 5. Dalit Biblical Interpretation in India

Christians living in India since ancient times found themselves in a society traditionally structured according to the four *varnas* (literally, «colors») and countless *jati* (literally, «birth»). Traditionally, these terms overlapped, with members of the same *jati* sometimes belonging to more than one *varna*. The English word «caste» comes from the Portuguese term, «casta», which first appeared in 1613. Usage of the English word can be confusing, since this term is frequently used to refer to one of the four *varnas*, but sometimes it is used to refer to a *jati*. Sometimes *jati* is translated as «sub-caste». The British translated The Law Code of Manu into English and sought to rule India in accordance with its prescriptions<sup>37</sup>. British colonial officials sought to regularize the classification system by putting each *jati* under a single *varna*, ignoring the complexities of earlier practice. In doing so, they probably made the system more strictly codified, rigid and inflexible.

In addition to the groups classified according to *varna*, Indian society contains marginalized communities who have been traditionally viewed as *avarna* («without color»), i.e., impure and «untouchable», and who were excluded from all but the most humiliating and menial positions. In the 20th century there were various movements to improve their situation. Mahatma Gandhi wanted to improve their situation and

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>36</sup> See Major J. Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*, Macon GA, Mercer University Press, 1987; D.H. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2005; J.H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, New York, Seabury Press, 1975; revised edition, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 1997.

<sup>37</sup> *The Law Code of Manu: A New Translation Based on the Critical Edition*, translated by P. Olivelle, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.



proposed calling those traditionally viewed as «untouchable» by the name, «harijan» («children of God»); Gandhi hoped to reform the caste system and grant the *harijan* a dignified place within it. However, the great leader of this community, B.R. Ambedkar, vehemently rejected Gandhi's word as condescending and vigorously attacked the Mahatma's expectation that the caste system could be reformed and made humane<sup>38</sup>. Ambedkar proposed the harsher, more realistic name, «Dalit» («suppressed» or «crushed»), for those were traditionally viewed as «outcastes», «untouchables» or «Pariahs». While there have been efforts to improve the situation of Dalits in Indian society, most continue to receive less education than other Indians, and most live in difficult financial condition<sup>39</sup>. India's rapid economic development has opened up new opportunities for a few Dalits; but for most, conditions remain difficult and in many cases have become worse.

Most Christians in India come either from the Dalit communities or from the traditionally marginalized communities commonly referred to as tribal or *adivasi* («from the origins» or «aboriginal,» i.e., the indigenous tribal peoples of India). According to some estimates, about 65-70% of Indian Christians come from a Dalit background, and another 15-20% from tribal communities<sup>40</sup>. The Indian government officially uses the term «scheduled castes» to refer to those formerly called «untouchable». While some Hindus view Dalits as Hindus and protest Dalit conversions to Christianity, many Dalits insist that they have never been Hindu<sup>41</sup>. Today the term «Dalit Christians» is widely used and accepted as a term of self-designation, but some persons from this background prefer to be called simply «Christians» and reject the label «Dalit».

<sup>38</sup> After striving to reform the Hindu social system for years, Ambedkar decided it was irreformable; toward the end of his life, he left the Hindu community and became a Buddhist. Today his followers are often called «neo-Buddhists». Cf. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Critical Edition*, edited by A. Singh Rathore and A. Verma, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011; V. Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012. G. Omvedt, *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India*, New Delhi - London - New York, Penguin Books Viking Press, 2004; E. Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, New Delhi, Navayana Publishing, 2013.

<sup>39</sup> See «Low-caste Indians Are Better Off Than Ever – But That's Not Saying Much», in «The Economist», January 25, 2018; <https://www.economist.com/news/asia/21735609-aject-deprivation-slowly-decreasing-prejudice-endures-low-caste-indians-are-better?frsc=dg%7Ce>; accessed January 30, 2018.

<sup>40</sup> R. Robinson - J. M. Kujur, *Introduction*, in R. Robinson - J. M. Kujur (eds.), *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, Los Angeles, Sage Publications, 2010, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> D. Mosse, *The Catholic Church and Dalit Christian Activism in Contemporary Tamil Nadu*, in R. Robinson - J.M. Kujur (eds.), *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, Los Angeles, Sage Publications, 2010, p. 249.

Some Christians in India have interpreted the Bible as harmonizing with the caste system. Thomas Christians in the South of India were traditionally viewed as upper caste. In the early 17th century Roberto de Nobili, S.J., adopted the lifestyle of a Brahmin and wore a sacred thread, reached out to the Brahmin caste, refused to minister to the Dalits of his day, and denied that Indians had to renounce their caste in order to become Christian<sup>42</sup>. Much Hindu-Christian dialogue has involved explorations of the elite Sanskrit tradition that includes the Vedas, the Upanishads, and the great Hindu epics<sup>43</sup>. As in North America, the Bible can be interpreted in directly conflicting ways in this context, and some Christians in India have interpreted the Bible as authorizing behavioral distinctions based on caste. According to the book of Genesis, Abraham directs his servant to «swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, but will go to my country and to my kindred and get a wife for my son Isaac» (Gen 24:3-4). Some Indian Christians have understood this as a precedent for authorizing only marriages within the same caste<sup>44</sup>. Dalit Christian theologians vigorously disagree. M. Gnanavaram rejects the harmonizing approach of de Nobili:

«As far as we understand it, the mission advocated by the gospel calls us to dismantle the caste structure and not to legitimize it. Therefore, de Nobili's effort is a clear example of how not to contextualize theology!»<sup>45</sup>.

While much Hindu-Christian dialogue has involved discussions of the elite Sanskrit tradition, many Dalits today fundamentally reject their position within traditional caste Hinduism, as Gnanavaram explains: «Dalit intellectuals and leaders now realize that this outlook shaped by Vedic and Puranic myths is a false consciousness serving the interests of the dominant castes and classes»<sup>46</sup>. Gnanavaram cites Jesus's parable of the Good Samaritan as a biblical analogy. Even though Samaritans, like

<sup>42</sup> M. Gnanavaram, '*Dalit Theology' and the Parable of Good Samaritan*, in «Journal for the Study of the New Testament», 15, 1993, 50, pp. 59-83.

<sup>43</sup> For example, the English Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths explored Sanskrit tradition in light of Christian faith. See B. Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, New York, Amity House, 1987; reprint, Springfield IL, Templegate Publishers, 2001.

<sup>44</sup> M. Gnanavaram, '*Dalit Theology' and the Parable of the Good Samaritan*, in «Journal for the Study of the New Testament», 15, 1993, 50, pp. 59-83, here p. 65, note 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68, note 18.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 79.

Dalits in India, were widely despised, Jesus holds up the marginalized Samaritan to his Jewish hearers as

89

«a model of compassion and life-giving actions; a model of identifying with the oppressed; a model of transcending the traditional barriers of culture and creed while identifying with the needy; and a model of renouncing ritual purity when ethical justice and mercy require it»<sup>47</sup>.

Gnanavaram pressed the implication, arguing that Jesus «means that Jews need Samaritans for their liberation. In other words, the Samaritans have to help the Jews to be liberated from their oppressive values and lifestyle ... In India, non-Dalits need Dalits for their liberation»<sup>48</sup>. Gnanavaram welcomes non-Dalits who acknowledge the evils of the traditional system and align themselves with Dalit movements for justice and equality.

This situation of mutual relationship recurs in one of the challenging biblical narratives, when Jesus responds to a Syro-Phoenician woman's request for help for her daughter, «Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs» (Mk 7:27); some have interpreted this as justifying eating only with one's own caste<sup>49</sup>. Once again, Dalit theologians vigorously disagree. Surekha Nelavala offers a Dalit feminist reading of Jesus's encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24-31), insisting that the woman obtains what she is seeking<sup>50</sup>. For the context of interpretation, Nelavala invokes her own experience as an object of discrimination because of her status as a Dalit woman: «Thus, as a Dalit woman, I begin my readings by placing my experience and context at the centre, and therefore my approach to the text is primarily from autobiographical experience»<sup>51</sup>. She notes that in this narrative Jesus is crossing borders and entering Gentile territory, where he becomes an outsider, a foreigner. Nelavala acknowledges that Jesus's harsh comment to the woman is disturbing and finds it analogous to experiences of Dalit women in India. She suggests, «In what Jesus says, there is a notion of insufficiency, and perhaps also a motive of selfishness. He was 'limited' only in his mind set, not

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65, note 10.

<sup>50</sup> S. Nelavala, *Smart Syrophenician Woman: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Mark 7:24-31*, in «Expository Times», 118, 2006, 2, pp. 64-69.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 65.

90 | in his 'resources'»<sup>52</sup>. Nelavala cites the traditional figure of the trickster to praise the woman's behavior as an example of wit and cunning<sup>53</sup>.

«She does not care what she is being called as long as Jesus listens to her plea. Her life teaches her that she can't afford to be aggressive or demanding. The woman did not make an intelligent remark but surely a wise one, emerging from her experience of being rejected»<sup>54</sup>.

The woman defeats Jesus by pretending to accept his premise and then «using his argument to her own advantage»<sup>55</sup>. While Jesus's initial response is unkind, Nelavala emphasizes the conversion that Jesus goes through: «The evangelizer ultimately was evangelized»<sup>56</sup>. At present the situation continues to be conflicted<sup>57</sup>. Many Christians in India today realize that in principle, Christians should welcome Dalits on equal terms, even though the long history of marginalization in Indian society tragically follows them into most Christian communities in India. Christians from upper-caste backgrounds generally exercise the major leadership positions in churches. Nonetheless, there are numerous efforts underway to reject the history of discrimination and improve the lives of Dalits. It is here that biblical interpretation plays an important part<sup>58</sup>. The Center for Dalit Studies (CDS) was founded in 2001 in Dwaraka Delhi, India, by Dalit Christian theologian James Massey. This center fosters research on the Bible from the perspective of Dalits and publishes a series of books known as the Dalit Bible Commentary. The goal of this research is to pose «a challenge to the wider Indian

---

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed study of the relationship between religions and human rights, sacred texts, and social innovation in contemporary India, see A. Vajpeyi, *Righteous Republic. The Political Foundation of Modern India*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2012. F. Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope: At the Dawn of the Millennium*, Delhi, ISPCK, Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2003; F. Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia: Struggles for a Different Society*, Delhi ISPCK, 2005; F. Wilfred, *Dalit Empowerment*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2007; G. Gispert-Sauch, *The Gospel and the Newspaper: Theological Queries Digging the Indian Quarry*, Delhi, ISPCK and Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2013.

<sup>58</sup> S. Clarke - D. Manchala - P. V. Peacock, *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010; J. Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Rereading the Text, the History and the Literature*, Delhi, IPCK, 1994; P. Rajkumar, *Dalit Theology and Dalit Liberation: Problems, Paradigms and Possibilities* (Surrey, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). S. Mulackal, *Ruth, Esther and Judith*, in T.K. John - J. Massey (eds.), *Dalit Bible Commentary*, vol. 6: *Old Testament*, New Delhi, Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies, 2011; R. Robinson - J. Marianus Kujur (eds.), *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2010.

theology by emphasizing the need to start theology from the situation and experience of the Dalits»<sup>59</sup>. Leonard Fernando, S.J., explains: «The Dalits and those on their side began to read the Bible and look at Jesus from the perspective of the oppressed. They began to own Jesus as the Dalit»<sup>60</sup>. Dalit Christian biblical interpretation proposes a moving vision of hope. Tragically, however, Michael Amaladoss acknowledges that the hopes of Dalits are not always fulfilled in Catholic Indian life today, even in Catholic religious orders: «Religious communities are meant to be counter-cultural. Unfortunately, they are as caste-ridden as the wider church»<sup>61</sup>.

## 6. Conclusions

At the conclusion of this discussion we would like to make some short observations. The central focus of the paper has been the analysis of the role of Biblical interpretation in social innovation, or rather in situations where a change in social practices derives from a radical change in mentality and in the values to which it gives rise. To show this, we limited our analysis on the role that biblical interpretation played in the origin and criticism of racism against North American blacks and in the interpretation the caste system in India. The possibility of Biblical interpretation having an effect in society bears on two kinds of question: on the one hand, regarding the contents of the Biblical narrative. Some biblical texts, more than others, lend themselves to forms of realization or relate to particularly important human experiences, for example the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt or the identification of the peoples with 'the sons of Noah'. On the other hand, religious images have the power to effect a transformation of values that promote social change».

As far as the first aspect is concerned, we have seen that Biblical interpretation works on several levels; it tries to explain the text, but also to

<sup>59</sup> G. Keerankeri, *A Visionary of Integrity on the Move*, in G. Keerankeri - V.P. Srivastava (eds.), *Taking Text to Context: A Festschrift in Honor of Fr. T.K. John, S.J. on the Occasion of his 75th Birth Anniversary*, Delhi, ISPCK Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>60</sup> L. Fernando, *Preface*, in L. Fernando - J. Massey (eds.), *Dalit World-Biblical World: An Encounter*, New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies and Vidyajyoti College of Theology, 2007, p. 6. G.M. Soares-Prabhu, *The Dharma of Jesus*, edited by F. Xavier D'Sa, Maryknoll NY, Orbis Books, 2003.

<sup>61</sup> M. Amaladoss, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theologies from Asia*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1997, p. 30.

explain an actual situation by means of it. This latter element is what allows it to produce an effect on particular reality, which becomes an analogue of the Biblical story. In this way the actual reality is interpreted and imagined as a function of a Biblical narrative and even of a single verse, which is capable of lending a shape to it, that is, of making it comprehensible, but also of prefiguring its development. The crossing of the Red Sea becomes a symbol and a celebration of liberation, but also a prefiguration of an inexorable destiny that gives courage. The curse of Ham supplies the sense of a vision of peoples who inhabit three continents and define their role and purpose, affording the Biblical grounds for racism. The Good Samaritan becomes an analogue of the Dalit and transforms those viewed as last into those who permit the liberation of «the so-called curse of Ham».

The Biblical text becomes in this way fully identified with the actual conditions of this world, where one tries to actualize its full meaning. At the same time, the particular situation is explained against a religious horizon, which provides its interpretative key. In spite of the birth of textual criticism and the influence of European Enlightenment, in the contexts we have discussed religious imagery remains mostly anchored in interpretations developed in harmony with the particular society. It is the 'here and now' that drives the search in the text for the ultimate explanation of the actual. Besides, in the Puritan vision, America was to be the New Sion, that is the place where a pure Christianity was realized in the form closest to that of its origins.

In this play of allusions, between interpretation and the striving for justification, the Biblical 'given' remains in its ambiguity: it is never self-evident. Textual interpretation requires, at least implicitly, a use of some criteria and choice of a perspective. Too many variables make textual interpretation uncertain and, often, its actual power lies in its being the adequate expression of the sensibility of a period, rather than its rendering an 'objective' meaning. It is in the familiarity of language and of the images that the text – or rather, its interpretation – exercises a power over reality, prefiguring its destiny or becoming an instrument for a different vision of the world.

As we have seen in connection with the origins of racism with regard to the blacks in America, there is a moment in which persistent discrimination against a group needs justification in order to be permanent. The *status quo* needs to be legitimized in other terms and to be justified in a broader context of meaning. In the same way, the situation of the

Dalits within Indian society was interpreted by Christians in different ways. In order to authorize social innovation, in this case in the negative sense of legitimating forms of discrimination and of slavery, there was a change of mentality that was based on some textual interpretations. The fact that the critical analysis of the Biblical text did not permit racial discrimination to be given a physical basis leads one to believe that the power of religious images is stronger than the narrative to which racism makes appeal. So it is not the narrative content of the Biblical text that authorizes a line of interpretation, but rather the readers who attribute a meaning to the text because of perceived needs in their situation which are extraneous to the biblical text. The power of this imagery can perhaps partly explain how on earth, even today, and in spite of the recognition of human dignity, the securing of rights and emancipation from superstition, in effect, a certain form of social innovation is possible only by means of a radical engagement with what lies deep in the human spirit.