
Dialogue under Fire: Revisiting the Case of Tissa Balasuriya, OMI

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After the publication of Tissa Balasuriya's book *Mary and Human Liberation*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) accused Balasuriya of deviating from the integrity of the truth of the Catholic faith. For this offence, he was excommunicated in January 1997. The severity of the punishment meted out to him by the CDF made Balasuriya a type of celebrity among Third World theologians. Many were sympathetic towards him and dreaded what the CDF might do next to those specializing in the areas of religious pluralism and interreligious dialogue. *Mary and Human Liberation* is not so much about Mariology as about Western theologies and the missionary enterprise. Even so, Balasuriya was accused of challenging fundamental Catholic beliefs, such as Original Sin and the Immaculate Conception, as well as allegedly embracing religious pluralism and relativism.

The most serious charges, according to the *Notification*, were that Balasuriya relativized Christological dogma and failed to acknowledge the uniqueness of Christ as Saviour, as well as the role of the Church in the economy of salvation. As we know, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, had spent his entire theological career fighting against the "dictatorship of relativism," which he deemed to be the gravest threat to the gospel since Marxism. The punishment of Balasuriya demonstrates that Ratzinger viewed the religious intuition of Asia as a variation on Western relativism and as a challenge to Catholic orthodoxy. Eventually, after a year, Balasuriya signed a "statement of reconciliation," and the excommunication was lifted on 15 January 1998.

By revisiting the case of Balasuriya, this article seeks to understand the difficulties and dangers of those working on the "frontiers" of Christian faith who often have to deal with the power and politics of the ecclesiastical establishment. Revisiting this case also reveals to us that the Church, like any other human institution, is liable to make mistakes and needs to be more transparent in its investigation of theologians who are suspected of having strayed from orthodoxy. The CDF needs to

adopt a more just and humane procedure in carrying out its duties. The story of Balasuriya's excommunication and reconciliation also brings home the importance of dialogue within the Church, the right of theologians to dissent, and the need for the Church to be open to theologians operating from a non-Western paradigm.

Towards an Asian Theology

Born on 29 August 1924 in Kahatagasdigiliya, Sri Lanka, into a middle-class Catholic family, Sirimevan Tissa Balasuriya joined the Congregation of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate in 1945, made his religious profession in 1946, and was ordained in Rome in 1952. After many years of working in various educational, social, economic, and religious projects, Balasuriya passed away after a long illness on 17 January 2013 at the age of 89. His funeral was attended by people from all walks of life, from Catholic priests to Buddhist monks. "Let us bury only the bones and the flesh of Fr Balasuriya," said the Bishop of Anuradhapura, who presided at the funeral, "but let us also keep his words and deeds with us."¹

The controversy around *Mary and Human Liberation* can be traced back to the 1990s movement, led by K.C. Abraham and others, to develop theologies from the context of the developing world. Balasuriya, as a founding member of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), contributed to this movement by writing his theology from an Asian perspective. He asserted that Asian cultural and religious backgrounds could contribute much to Christian theology, because in Asia many other ancient religions co-exist, which calls into question the Christian idea that God's revelation is confined to the Bible alone. Asian theologians are convinced that God's power cannot be limited, which means that the sacred texts of other religious traditions can also be a source of divine revelation. Further, it is evident that non-Christian religions have contributed much good and human fulfilment in Asia for many centuries, long before Christianity arrived on its shores.²

In *Mary and Human Liberation*, as well as in his other works, Balasuriya argues that Asian Christian

theology must admit the possibility of other ways of interpreting the origin of the universe, human life, and the afterlife. As a foreign religion associated with Western colonialism, Christian teaching is seen as primarily a Western construct built upon a selective interpretation of Scripture. Church doctrine regarding Jesus' divinity and humanity is not intelligible in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Balasuriya considers Christ the cosmic Lord, and therefore he cannot be limited to Jesus as a human person born in a particular time and space.³ He suggests that we rethink the traditional dogma defined by Chalcedon (451). Calling for a "dedogmatization" of theology, he questions the presuppositions behind some of the Church doctrines, which were little more than ideologies that legitimized the Western missionary approach. For Balasuriya, the commitment to be true followers of Jesus Christ in the context of poverty and plurality of religions in Asia should lead us to care for the poor and respect people of other faiths. This means the sharing of material and spiritual goods among different religions. Regarding countries under socialist governments in Asia (such as China and Vietnam), Balasuriya calls for a greater autonomy and self-reliance for local churches in formulating their own doctrines and in their administration.⁵

He calls for a deconstruction and reconstruction of the theological processes dominated by European thinking. This reinventing of theology includes listening to people who are marginalized and oppressed, which would lead to a critical redefining of scripture and tradition, that tended to discriminate on the basis of race, gender, social class, and other religious beliefs.⁶ In relation to these issues, Balasuriya also calls for a rethinking of the questions of original sin, gender relations, as well as the role of Jesus Christ and the Church in the economy of salvation. He bemoans the fact that the practice of spirituality in the Church has failed to discredit racial and gender discrimination because its understanding of spirituality is based on the 'modern,' self-centred, individualistic approach prevalent in the West. Balasuriya wants a spirituality that is more socially oriented and broader in its interpersonal concern and which includes studies and appreciation of other religions and cultures.⁷ Without such a shift, he believes that the process of secularization that is happening in the West may spread to Asia as the educated young start to find the Church irrelevant.

Unfortunately, Balasuriya argues, Church authorities are reluctant to acknowledge the validity and signifi-

cance of this call for a rethinking in theology because of their attachment to orthodoxy and traditions that assured them great power and influence. Furthermore, not only are Church authorities keen to preserve and protect the faith of the ordinary believers, the faithful are also attached to the pious practices that keep them in subjugation: "the internalization of one's own subjection to the powerful acquires a legitimation and sacredness."⁸ Critical of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Balasuriya argues that a traditional Mariology developed in a Church that monopolized the sources of grace and that was dominated by a male clergy contradicts the spirit of interreligious dialogue, because it marginalizes other religions and opposes the spirit of Christian ecumenism. We need to rethink our understanding of Mariology and Christology at both the theoretical and spiritual levels so they can be relevant to our pluralistic society both in Asia and, increasingly, in the West.⁹

Interfaith Relations

For Balasuriya, interreligious dialogue is "a source of theology."¹⁰ This suggests that through dialogue with other religions, we can understand better God's revelation in history. It is also another means of listening to God and participating in building God's Kingdom on earth. In interreligious dialogue, Balasuriya insists that we take into consideration the idea of the divine or absolute in other religions, which is very different from that found in orthodox Christianity. For example, Theravada Buddhists think that ultimate reality (or what we might call the divine) is unknowable or impersonal, and many Hindus see all reality "pantheistically." Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion that cannot accept the ideas of Trinity and Incarnation in Christianity. In this context, Balasuriya argues, Christians in Asia must rethink their understanding of Jesus Christ and redemption. From an Asian perspective, it is clear that the Hellenistic and Roman philosophical-theological formulations are not the only way to articulate the mystery of the divine.¹¹

To have a better appreciation of other religions, according to Balasuriya, Christians have to be aware of the presuppositions on which their theology and philosophy are built. Religious traditions like Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity have their teachings based on certain presuppositions given by their cultural and philosophical systems. For example, the Western system of logic is based on the principle of non-contradiction and has "a tendency to be exclusive of opposites." Many oriental understandings of logic,

however, are “more inclusive and harmonizing.”¹² (Of course, Balasuriya is simplifying his point for the sake of illustration. We cannot separate the world so neatly into two distinct modes of thinking: Western dualistic and Eastern non-dualistic systems. In other words, there is variety within “East” and “West” as well as overlap between them.) Beyond philosophical and cultural difference, in view of the different presuppositions in each religion, Balasuriya asks, what should be the attitude of Christians towards these other faiths?¹³ To answer that question, Balasuriya emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the core of Christianity (namely, the teaching of Jesus in the gospel) and the subsequent development in the interpretation of the scripture by the Church. He regards the teaching of Jesus as “the communication of his primordial spiritual experience.”¹⁴ Balasuriya points out that there is “hardly anything that is divisive of religions” in the message of Jesus.¹⁵ In other words, other religions will not find the message of the gospel objectionable.

Balasuriya believes in the personal acceptance of Jesus Christ as “our guide in life” and the scripture as divine revelation. However, he reminds us that the teaching of the Church concerning how we live our Christian lives must be verified by our own personal experience, because theology developed by different communities is based on different presuppositions. In other words, while God may be absolute, theological statements about God can be relative. Balasuriya claims that the Church’s answer to theological questions can “claim only a faith that is due to the Church in her teaching power. They are not necessarily answers directly from Jesus.”¹⁶ In fact, conflicts among Christians of different denominations are due to secondary conclusions arising from different presuppositions. The core teaching remains the same. Hence, in interfaith relations, Christians must be aware of their secondary presuppositions, which have the tendency of making their religion exclusive or normative.¹⁷ The challenge for Christians is to distinguish between the essential core of Jesus’ teaching, which is not relative, and subsequent development and elaboration of his message, which may be. It is a difficult task, Balasuriya admits, because many Christians consider the teaching of the Church to be the norm of the Christian faith.

However difficult, this task is essential in a society where there is a plurality of religions, and interreligious dialogue is needed to promote peace, mutual respect, and understanding. Balasuriya warns that in some Asian

countries, there are serious religious and communal conflicts, especially when one religion claims the right to dominate others or claims to be the only true path to salvation.¹⁸ Clearly, a religion that recognizes the equality of all people before God would obviously have a different impact on history from the one that claims for its adherents a special status as “chosen people.” In order to promote better appreciation of other faiths, we have to understand that the presuppositions of one religion are not necessarily more valid than those of other religions. After all, presuppositions in theology concern things that cannot be empirically verified. This does not necessarily lead us to relativism, because human fulfillment achieved through religious belief and practice can be observed in the lives of adherents. “By their fruits you will know them” (Matt. 7:20). Thus, Balasuriya argues, it is possible to discover a critical principle that is valid for interpreting Christian theology as well as valid for interpreting other religions.¹⁹ This principle refers to how much a religion can promote justice, peace, and love among its followers.

Rethinking Christology and Mariology

In view of the plurality of cultures and religions of Asia, Balasuriya calls for a re-evaluation of Christology and Mariology at a deeper level than what is being done in Europe. He thinks that Western theology, with its specific presuppositions, has had a negative and damaging effect on the people of Asia for centuries and remains an obstacle to interreligious dialogue. He calls for a rethinking of the core teaching of Christianity regarding the nature of salvation, the role of religions, and the identity of the various founders, such as Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammad.²⁰ Balasuriya limits the role of religions to specific functions: offering a path for purification and liberation; offering good models for holiness; forming communities of holiness; and providing core values for personal and community growth. He stresses that religious communities and organizations are, after all, “this-worldly realities.” Although they emphasize the afterlife, no one knows what happens after death. All we have is faith in God’s grace. Religious organizations, Balasuriya asserts, have no influence beyond death.²¹

Vatican II teaches that God’s grace is available to everyone: Christians, non-Christians, and even those with no religion. Christians believe in redemption through Jesus Christ, but Jesus did not deny salvation to those of goodwill. Balasuriya points out that the grace and merits of Christ cannot be controlled and channelled exclusive-

ly by one particular Church or religious organization, which in any case cease to operate beyond this life. The role of religion is to help people to attain human fulfillment and realization as individuals and members of a community, as well as liberation for our Mother Earth.²² What Balasuriya suggests here is that the Church will cease to exist after its earthly journey—only the Kingdom of God will be realized in the fullness of time where all things are gathered in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10).

Balasuriya claims that in the Asian context, the doctrine of “divine maternity” of Mary raises questions concerning Jesus’ divinity. At the same time, he acknowledges that in the Hindu–Buddhist context, Mary as the Mother of God can be accepted as one of the deities or goddesses at the popular level. Hinduism, for example, can accept divine manifestations of the Absolute known as avatars, and Mary as the Mother of God can be understood within that theological framework. This understanding is, of course, different from the Christology taught by the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, which insist on the exclusive nature of Jesus’ divinity, which can be an obstacle in dialogue with Hinduism. With Muslims, the elevated status of Mary will present a greater obstacle—given the strict understanding of monotheism in Islam.²³ This suggests that traditional Church teaching on Christ and Mary can cause an impasse in interreligious dialogue. Balasuriya prefers to focus on the mediation of Mary understood as “atoning and reconciling humanity” with God or as a “channel of divine grace as in mediatrix of graces.”²⁴ Popular Asian religions, he argues, have no difficulty in accepting Mary as a “mediator and channel of divine favours.”

However, the real obstacle may be linking Mary’s status to the idea of an exclusive and unique mediator or saviour, Jesus Christ. Traditional Christology emphasizes the divine nature of Jesus and sees humanity as a fallen race that can be redeemed by Christ alone. Balasuriya points out that this exclusive definition of Jesus is a major issue in Asia, unlike Europe and Latin America, where the majority of the people profess at least a cultural Christianity. Aware that we should not dilute our faith for the sake of dialogue, Balasuriya calls for a re-examination of the traditional doctrine of Christ’s divinity and exclusivity, which might not necessarily originate from scripture or Jesus himself.²⁵

Interreligious dialogue, thus, can be seen as an opportunity for Christians to rethink and re-evaluate traditional theological assumptions. Although these are not

directly related to Marian spirituality, the understanding of Christ is crucial for the development of Marian dogma. Balasuriya wishes to see a portrayal of Mary as one who is eloquent in her silence and courageous in her commitment to her Son’s mission. Readily accepted as a mediator between God and humanity, Mary will be loved and invoked by the people in Asia as well as in the Church.

Most of the ideas put forward in *Mary and Human Liberation* are not new. In his earlier work, *Planetary Theology*, published in 1984, Balasuriya claims that traditional Christian theology is determined by dominant Western powers, which are capitalist oriented, male, and clerical. They interpret the scripture in a way that suits their interests. With their Western prejudice and lack of respect for indigenous beliefs, they deny that these other religious traditions can have salvific features. Further, Balasuriya asserts that traditional Christian theology is also “culture-bound” and “implicitly ethnocentric.” It has unwittingly assisted in European colonialism and, as such, has rendered many aspects of Christian teaching unacceptable to non-Westerners. Church-centred, traditional theology often equated the kingdom of God with the expansion of the Church. It regards the Church as an indispensable vehicle to get people to heaven.²⁶ This position alienates many people in Asia.

The Storm Starts: *Latae Sententiae*

A work like this, from a Third World theologian, criticizing the Church teaching authorities in no uncertain terms, could not avoid attracting the ire of the Vatican. Over the last fifteen years, the CDF has acted against theologians’ writings regarding women’s ordination, religious pluralism, and other issues in Christology and ecclesiology, and Balasuriya’s book touches on almost all of these issues. Thus, on 2 January 1997, the CDF published a “Notification on the Work of *Mary and Human Liberation* of Fr. Tissa Balasuriya OMI” signed by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and by Prefect and Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of the Congregation, announcing Balasuriya’s excommunication.

The *Notification* accused Balasuriya of denying the dogma of Original Sin and viewing it simply as a development of Western theological thought. According to the *Notification*, this led him to question Mary’s Immaculate Conception, perpetual virginity, and bodily assumption. Furthermore, it charged Balasuriya with “denying the authority of tradition as a mediation of revealed truth.”

In reducing the Petrine ministry to a question of power, the CDF claimed, he was in fact denying the infallibility of the pope. The *Notification* concludes with this sentence: “In publishing this *Notification*, the Congregation is obliged also to declare that Father Balasuriya has deviated from the integrity of the truth of the Catholic faith and, therefore, cannot be considered a Catholic theologian; moreover, he has incurred excommunication *latae sententiae* (can. 1364, par. 1).”²⁷

Two things can be gathered here. First, the CDF objected to the fact that Balasuriya has encouraged a religious pluralism and relativism that Ratzinger had labelled as an ideology that mortally threatens the Catholic faith. Second, it objected that Balasuriya questioned the Church’s authority to teach divine truth. The CDF held that, as much as the Church respects the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful), this does not mean that one can challenge the teaching of the Magisterium. *Latae sententiae* meant that Balasuriya has excommunicated himself by persisting in the errors stated in his book, and thus no formal trial is needed. The only other case of excommunication we know of in the present times is that of the French bishop Marcel Lefebvre (1906–1991), not for heresy but for promoting schism within the Church.

Learning of the excommunication, Balasuriya said: “When this threat of excommunication was made I found it unthinkable. There was no excommunication of a theologian for half a century. I asked myself how they could come to this extreme action, when all they had said was that my response was ‘unsatisfactory.’ I felt this was a complete travesty of justice.”²⁸ Hans Küng, who was himself investigated and censured by the CPF, said, “This is much tougher perhaps because he is a Third World theologian. It is very serious for this man, and it is very unjust, but it is the consequence of the system. This is the system as it works, and as it will work as long as Catholicism doesn’t get rid of a doctrine that says that the pope is always right.” He added, “They [the CDF] want to menace everyone else who is in this field.”²⁹

Charles Curran, also disciplined by the CDF, wrote to Balasuriya to give his support:

The action against you is so much more radical than the action against me. The Vatican’s action against me (and in the case of Hans Küng) was limited to my role as a Catholic theologian and did not affect my canonical identity as a Catholic or even my role in the order of presbyters. The Vatican action now separates you canonically

from the church community and from the exercise of priestly ministry I was hurt by the action against me, but you must be devastated by what has been done to you.³⁰

The Balasuriya File, which consists of letters opposing the excommunication of Balasuriya, published by *The Tablet*, states:

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s resort to excommunication marks a more ruthless and extreme exercise of its power and a departure from its previous policy of merely condemning an individual as unfit to teach Catholic theology. Excommunication is an ultimate and terrible punishment, which the Vatican hesitates to apply to South American dictators, Mafia members and IRA bosses who put themselves “beyond the pale.”³¹

Reaction from outside the Catholic Church was also very strong. For example, Rev. Roy Robinson from the United Reformed Church wrote: “As for Fr Balasuriya’s excommunication, can the Pope really be serious in inviting us, the representatives of the Churches of the Reformation, to discuss with him the role of the papacy, when he gives us such examples of the abuse of papal authority?”³²

The main issue in this affair is not whether Balasuriya’s theological ideas are heretical or not, but the way he was treated by the Church he had served for so long as a faithful servant. His treatment goes against a natural sense of justice. The severity of the punishment also calls into question the way the procedure was carried out. The CDF acted as prosecutor, judge, and jury, pronouncing a sentence in which there was no appeal.

What is at stake?

By excommunicating Balasuriya, Ratzinger was warning those who work in the field of religious pluralism not to stray from orthodoxy. This move, however, stifles the spirit of creativity, especially in the promotion of interreligious relations. The severity of the punishment is likely to prevent good theology from flourishing. It is ironic that Ratzinger defended the excommunication of Balasuriya at a press conference by claiming that “one of the greatest challenges for the Church of the third millennium” is the search for an authentic Asian Catholicism. “We are very sensitive to the situation in this great Asian continent, so decisive for the future of humanity,” he declared. “We are very attentive not to

quench the flame of the appropriation and creation of an Asian identity for the Catholic faith.”³³

The most serious charge against Balasuriya’s book was that of relativism, which Ratzinger characterized as “the central problem for faith today.”³⁴ He said that when relativists called for interreligious dialogue, they meant “putting one’s own position, i.e. one’s faith, on the same level as the convictions of others without recognising in principle more truth in it than that which is attributed to the opinions of others.”³⁵ Truth, thus, becomes relativized, which in fact is no truth at all, in Ratzinger’s opinion. Hence, truth is being devalued by relativism. Ratzinger insists that there are “non-negotiables” that Catholic theologians must uphold in the presence of other religions.³⁶

The Tablet editorial maintained that Balasuriya “is not a full-hearted relativist of the sort Cardinal Ratzinger attacked in his lecture With or without reservations, no true relativist could have signed the Credo of Pope Paul VI, as he did.” In fact, Balasuriya is more of a pluralist than a relativist. The editorial asserts that “pluralism springs not from a loss of value, but on the contrary from an absolute respect for the neighbour, and in this sense Christians are the original pluralists. Any theologian who is pluralist in this sense is true to the central Christian requirement.”³⁷ Unfortunately, Ratzinger equated pluralism with relativism. The excommunication of Balasuriya is indeed a sad episode in the life of the Church. There is cause for lamentation.

Bradford E. Hinze asserts that when considering those theologians investigated by church authorities, we need to listen to their lamentations because they reveal the conflicts, anxieties, and impasse involved in the procedures of the CDF. In other words, lamentation articulates the anguish and pain that some scholars in the Church face when they try to be creative and faithful to the Spirit. Seen as offering “a source of wisdom, renewal and reform in the church,” lamentation is “a privileged site for hearing the Spirit of God who groans in the human heart and the suffering world when something new is struggling into existence and when the Spirit is stifled.”³⁸

Bradford Hinze discusses ten ‘lamentations’ of the theologians investigated.³⁹ We will discuss the three most common ones here. First, the theologians concerned complain that they were never informed of who reported them to the CDF and who examined their work. Did the examiner have the competency and expertise to judge their work? In spite of efforts to humanize and

modernize its processes, the CDF lacks proper procedure to investigate errors in theological writings. Its processes are secretive, inquisitorial, and unfair to the accused, by any modern standards of jurisprudence. Second, the theologian being investigated has to keep silence when the case is going on, which means isolating the individual, depriving him of support. There is no transparency regarding the actions of the CDF, and thus it cannot be held accountable and its action cannot be evaluated in public. This imposition of secrecy and silence is painful to the theologian. Third, a frequent complaint is that the theologians’ works were not interpreted accurately: for example, that passages from their work are often taken out of context. For example, Balasuriya complained of the 58 “unproved generalizations, misrepresentations, distortions and even falsifications” by the CDF, which he tried to clarify.⁴⁰

The Right to Dissent

In giving the *nihil obstat*, or permission for a Catholic theologian to publish his or her work, Ratzinger makes a distinction between teaching in the name of the Church and pure research.⁴¹ But many theologians do not see themselves as Church officials teaching in the name of the Church. In fact, Balasuriya criticizes Church teaching for distorting the gospel. Most theologians accept the fact that the Vatican has the right to question and admonish teachings that harm the faith. However, to silence and excommunicate theologians violates academic freedom. Concerning Vatican II’s decision to rehabilitate some theologians, Avery Dulles wrote: “By its actual practice of revision, the council implicitly taught the legitimacy and even the value of dissent. In effect the council said that the ordinary magisterium of the Roman Pontiff had fallen into error and had unjustly harmed the careers of loyal and able scholars.”⁴² This meant that the Church accepted the right to dissent in theological disputes. Be that as it may, the theologians subjected to discipline complained that the CDF procedure for investigation is flawed; the accusations are unclear; there is a failure to make a distinction between dogma and theological opinion; and only experts who toe the Vatican line are consulted. Clearly, there are “serious deficiencies in the justice of their process,” Charles Curran reported.⁴³ The Catholic Theological Society of America also reported that the procedures used by the CDF to investigate dissident theologians “fail to honour fundamental human rights and the safeguards in our

countries [U.S. and Canada] necessary to protect these human rights.”⁴⁴

While there is certainly a more humane way to carry out this procedure, we must admit that there will always be tension between theologians and the CDF: the tension created by making the faith more relevant to contemporary society and to specific cultures and the need to protect the faith from distortion. We cannot expect the CDF, as a bureaucracy, to be forward looking, promoting cutting-edge theology. Its main function is to protect and preserve Catholic orthodoxy in faith and morals. However, Thomas Reese says that the number of theologians investigated and censured is at an all-time high, even more than the numbers during the Modernist crisis in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries. If this rift between theologians and the Magisterium continues, Reese believes that the Church will lack creative thinking to respond to new questions, needs, and opportunities in the new millennium.⁴⁵ In other words, the Church will make itself irrelevant in the postmodern world and may even promote schism.

The Storm Subsides: Reconciliation

The reconciliation of Balasuriya with the Catholic Church took place on 15 January 1998 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Balasuriya signed Pope Paul VI’s Profession of Faith in the presence of Nicholas Marcus Fernando, Archbishop of Colombo; Osvaldo Padilla, the Apostolic Nuncio in Sri Lanka; and Fr. Marcello Zago, Superior General of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. According to an official document from the archbishop’s office, he “regretted the harm caused” by *Mary and Human Liberation* and by “subsequent events.” He also “expressed his Catholic faith and recognised the authority of the magisterium [teaching authority] exercised at both the local and universal levels in regard to his writings.” Agreeing to submit his writings on faith and morals for Church approval, he also promised to “abstain from any declaration that is in contradiction to this reconciliation.”⁴⁶

The Oblates’ office in Colombo reported that “Although the process of reviewing all that led to the excommunication was rather painful, it was an experience of grace and healing, first of all for Fr Balasuriya himself and for all those associated with this moment of open and honest dialogue.” The support he had received from his religious congregation was due to his years of dedicated and generous service. Not an obdurate person, Balasuriya was willing to revise or change his ideas. He

says in the preface of *Mary and Human Liberation* that his work “is open to criticism and correction in a climate and context of a genuine search for the truth.”⁴⁷ The case of Balasuriya gives us the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between theologians and the Magisterium, the issue of religious pluralism and interfaith relations, and power and politics in the Vatican.

Critical Reflection

Distinguished theologians like Küng and Curran were investigated and censured by the CDF and were forbidden to teach in Catholic faculties and seminaries, but, unlike Balasuriya, they were not excommunicated. It is thus intriguing that Balasuriya had to face such severe punishment. Unlike Küng and Curran, Balasuriya was an Asian theologian from a developing nation. Perhaps Church officials have little respect for Asia, or for developing nations, or perhaps he simply did not have the powerful friends in the Vatican that others did. The CDF under Ratzinger wanted to rein in pluralist theologians, and it was a clear warning to others working in this field. More than just questioning the Church authorities’ exclusive mandate to teach, Balasuriya’s ideas stood in stark contrast to Ratzinger’s own theological approach.

As we have seen, in *Planetary Theology* (1984), Balasuriya supports religious pluralism and criticizes the ecclesiastical establishment as well. However, this book was never censured. Why? One can only speculate that in the 1980s, the Magisterium was not so preoccupied with the errors connected with religious pluralism and that Ratzinger was just settling into his new position as Prefect of the CDF. It was only in the 1990s that religious pluralism and relativism became such burning issues.

The trial of Balasuriya involved an exchange of many letters, but there was no opportunity for constructive dialogue on theological issues. Balasuriya was not allowed face-to-face contact with high-ranking officials in the CDF. This was a painful episode regarding the Church’s treatment of a theologian who laboured to make the gospel more relevant to his people. It makes one wonder how the Church can engage in dialogue with other religions when it cannot conduct a proper dialogue within its own ranks. Balasuriya made this astonishing remark: “In fact, it was through the BBC that I first heard about my own excommunication!”⁴⁸

There may be unconventional ideas in Balasuriya’s *Mary and Human Liberation* that need to be investigated, but to excommunicate Balasuriya in this post-modern

age seems farcical given the checkered history of the Vatican. Some believed that the massive protest in the media helped to shorten the length of Balasuriya's excommunication. But it is significant that the Church sought to reconcile with Balasuriya so quickly.

One can only speculate under what condition and context Balasuriya signed the Profession of Faith. It seems that there was compromise on both sides: the Vatican's and Balasuriya's. Belonging to a religious congregation like the Oblates of Mary Immaculate helped much in the process of his reconciliation with Church authorities. It could be that realizing its mistake and how badly it had handled the whole affair, Rome was anxious to conclude this sordid episode without losing face. This was hastened by the worldwide outcry and extensive media coverage that were assisted by the Internet, where news spreads fast and wide. Perhaps this is how the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) expresses itself now. It is a new reality that the Vatican needs to understand and accommodate. This means that the Catholic Church has to move out of its pre-modern ghetto into the global world—that is, into the Information Age, where greater transparency is expected.

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1 *AsianNews.it*, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Fr-Tissa-Balasuriya,-controversial-Sri-Lankan-theologian,-laid-to-rest-26925.html>. See also *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/06/father-tissa-balasuriya> and Basil Fernando, *Power versus Conscience* (Hong Kong: Asian Human Rights Commission and Asian Legal Resource Centre Ltd, 1997), 1–15.

2 Tissa Balasuriya, "An Asian Perspective," in K.C. Abraham, ed. *Third World Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 114.

3 *Ibid.*, 117.

4 *Ibid.*, 117.

5 *Ibid.*, 118.

6 Tissa Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 48.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 49.

9 *Ibid.*, 105.

10 Balasuriya, "An Asian Perspective," 115.

11 *Ibid.*, 115–16.

12 Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 109.

13 *Ibid.*, 110.

14 *Ibid.*, 111.

15 *Ibid.*, 112.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*, 113.

19 *Ibid.*, 114.

20 *Ibid.*, 128–29.

21 *Ibid.*, 129.

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24 *Ibid.*, 160.

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43 Reese, *Inside the Vatican*, 254.

44 Quoted in Reese, *Inside the Vatican*, 254–55.

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