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Impurity and Revelation - 
Life and History of Dalits in a 
Christian Perspective

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Being a form and an example of a liberation theology, Dalit theology should be situated in the ongoing debate about fundamental and paradigmatic orientations within liberation theology.\(^1\) So, Dalit theology looks for its own place and role within questions whether theology should be oriented on theological criticism of economics and economy in the light of the massive poverty in India; or should it be primarily directed to a theological criticism of Indian cultures and their histories in so far as they suppress indigenous developments of especially tribal and Dalit cultural and religious expressions of life and history?

These questions are not only and not even in the first place methodical ones, just for meta-theory. They bring us in the midst of the classic concerns of Christian theology. The traditional formula of theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith in quest of understanding. So, theology is a quest and a path, a historical and historically and contextually determined routing to horizons that embrace continuously changing expressions of our trust in God (as longed for by Abraham and by Jesus Christ) and that embrace - at the same time - ever changing insights in human knowledge. Referring to the traditional definition of theology, I want to stress three landmarks of every theology.

1) Theology is a quest, a way of being. Its theoretical dimensions, as important as they are, serve in the end our communal and my personal longing towards the ever hidden and present mystery of God. Therefore, theology emerges from a religious passion.

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2) Theology's starting point is an act of trust (that's the original meaning of 'faith'). Trust is a personal commitment towards others, towards a community that has appeared to be trustful. Because of these reasons, the starting point of theology is a contextual one. Trust and trustfulness are embedded in cultural and socio-political common goods and are oriented at the future of a specific community. So, the analyses of these common goods are a core business when doing theology.

3) Theology is a theoretical enterprise too, as analyses cannot be done without a theoretical framework and as results of analyses cannot be understood and evaluated otherwise than reconstructing the framework. Taking this theoretical elaboration in to consideration, theology always is directed to conceptualisation of and reflection on different forms of praxis that try to implement the cultural and socio-political common goods. Along side this practical orientation, theology is directed to conceptualisation of and reflection on different forms of contemplation. Conceptualisation of and reflection on praxis and contemplation are the two (classical) dimensions of the theoretical enterprise which is called: doing theology.

Theology has to be defined in the triangle between: the longing towards the mystery of God, the analysis of personal and societal implementation of common goods and a theoretical elaboration of 'praxis' and 'contemplation' with regard to this implementation.

In the light of these features and tasks of theology, life and history of the Dalits are to be studied from a theological perspective. So, this theological perspective does not add some specific knowledge coming from elsewhere to the life and the history of the Dalits. Of course, theology lodges a whole tradition of practical and theoretical insights and does so already before the life and the history of the Dalits have become subject matter of theological questions and reflections. But, because theological research starts from the life and the history of the Dalits, the central questions are (in line with the just indicated threefold character of theology):

1) In what way this body of knowledge can be reinterpreted in a way that supports our real intrinsic understanding of what's characteristic for being a human being? Therefore, I want to deepen my understanding of life and history of Dalit people in order to understand better than before what is at stake in our idea about the 'humanity' of a human being. What does 'humanity' mean when seen from the perspective of 'impure people'?
2) In what way cultural and socio-economic analyses of the situation of Dalit people can deepen our concept of the common good, and how the concept of the common good has to be rephrased as a good of people who still are largely considered as ‘untouchables’.

3) In what way the life and the history of Dalit people, in their complex processes of emergence in the Indian society, can contribute to a more elaborate concept of liberation, in its practical as well as in its conceptual dimensions.

In the Christian tradition, the ‘humanity’ of a human being is a very important clue to get access to the hidden presence of God. These three questions support to understand better what humanity is about and so they contribute to theo-logia in its mystical sense.

Let us go back to the question that this paper started with. The previous definitions of theology seem to make clear that the ongoing debate in liberation theology could end in erroneous contradictions. On the other hand, this ongoing debate is not a ‘free’ academic dispute. The urgent injustice of poverty as well as the urgent acknowledgment of the right of indigenous cultures make - according to my interpretation of Christian faith - any academic dispute to a question on liberation and make theology to an accomplice of destitute people.

In the next sections, I want to give an example how the life and history of Dalit people can be the starting point of a theological analysis that offers a new conceptualisation of the humanity of human beings. In the first section, I want to present an analysis of the concept of impurity. The second section analyses what is common in the common good from the perspective of Dalits. The third section defines what liberation means from the perspective of Dalit theology.

1. The Concept of Impurity

Many religious traditions define a human being from a ritual background and from a ritual point of view. Sociological theories about religion make it clear that the way a human being is approached in a society, is highly influenced by ritual concepts. Sometimes, these concepts have impacts that are more decisive than even family-ties or blood relationships. I want to give you an example. When I became (1959) a 12 year old student in a minor seminary in our diocese, my Catholic parents treated me as a normal child in any respect. So, they did not offer special meals for their son because he was studying for the priesthood. But they were still aware that
this habit was a usual one in small villages at the country-side 10 years earlier. My parents’ behaviour has been a signal of changing patterns in the Catholic mindset in The Netherlands at that time. The ritual changed because of all kinds of reasons, so their as well as my ideas about religion have changed. In a local community, rituals perform a belief system and a changing faith. The great French sociologist Emile Durkheim expressed in his famous book *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912) that dancing around a totem shapes a religious community and its belief systems.

In this paper, I am dealing with some implications of ritual impurity. In this section, I will make use of a recently finished Ph.D. research² which states,

We have to view the practices of ritual impurity within the totality of the religious system of which they constitute a meaningful part, and accordingly their religious signification. It is important... to avoid any piece meal interpretation of the pollution rules, particularly when they are part of some specific cultural traditions. The only way the pollution ideas make sense is in reference to a total structure of thought, whose “key stone” boundaries, margins and internal lines are held together by rules of unity/separation. What we see in the purity practices are the gestures of separation, classifying and establishing order.³

The ritual purity and impurity rules bring about a symbolic system. The influence of these rules goes far deeper than hygienic measures and practices that differentiate between clean and dirty bodies. ‘It is true’, as Lourdusamy points out, ‘that there can be a marvellous correspondence between the avoidance of contagious disease and ritual avoidance.’ Hygienic purposes have to be considered as side-effects of ritual actions. But purity and impurity rules do much more. They install a symbolic system that differentiate not only between clean and dirty bodies but differentiate between bodies that are hierarchically ranked from a perspective that structures the humanity of human beings. These differentiations install a worldview within which ‘men neither are nor can be equal’.⁴ The French anthropologist Louis Dumont defines this as ‘the irruption of the biological into the social life.’⁵

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². Dr. Paulraj Lourdusamy (Madras) that I have directed together with two colleagues of the Radboud University Nijmegen, which will be submitted as a doctoral manuscript within a few months.

³. ms. p. 117.

⁴. ms. p. 118.

⁵. ms. p. 119.
This symbolic system has important religious dimensions too. The satisfactory communication with the supernatural powers is necessary for the good of the king and the society. This idea goes back to the ancient Aryan idea of 'rta', the belief that the sacrificial offerings made by a Brahmin were necessary for the continuity of the natural order... Sacrifices were regarded to be the basis of the universe and the maintenance and continuity of everything in the nature was attributed to sacrifice.6

In his research, Dr. Lourdusamy stresses the central role of the Brahmins in this symbolic system, especially with regard to the religious dimensions of the symbolic system. Not all Brahmins are priests; in fact a majority of them are not. But sociologically speaking, the Brahmin caste-as Lourdusamy affirms-is theoretically the priestly order.7 Although he acknowledges the differences of the presence of Brahmins correlating to various regions, he states 'the Brahmins, concerned first of all about their own ritual purity, enforced the rules of purity and pollution among all the Hindus'.8

Without the persuasive, integrative presence of the 'great tradition' of Brahmanism, it is to be wondered whether Hindu religion would be anything other than a multitude of local cults. There is continuity between the 'great tradition' of the Brahmins and the local folk culture, as they created together an overarching Hindu culture and unifying civilization... In any analysis of ritual impurity in Hinduism, without denying change over the centuries, one is nonetheless sent back to the complex, stable brahmanic system of values, beliefs and practices that bring coherence to the surface variations within Hinduism. It alone makes the practices of ritual purity and impurity comprehensible.5

One of the very interesting features of Dr. Lourdusamy's analysis of ritual purity and impurity, being an irruption of the biological into the social life (Dumont), is that this irruption is intrinsically connected with the history of a social system. Although ritual purity and impurity are the result of being born in a specific caste (varna), these ritual definitions of a human body are not quasi-essential features of human nature, conceived in a Platonic way, but definitions of the human body that define the body

6. ms. p. 119-120.
7. ms p. 127.
8. ms. p. 125.
from the perspective of an eternal Law as well as from the perspective of the history of power relations that can be reconstructed in the complex history of India. According to Dr. Lourdusamy’s research, the caste system is deeply intertwined with ritual purity and impurity and has to be interpreted as such of those who are on the other side of the existence of casteless people, the reverse side of the existence and history of Dalits. To put it the other way around: the very existence of people, who are ritually impure in an absolute way, is the *ratio essendi* of the whole complicated system of castes and its rules of purity and impurity. The ritual definitions of a human body as have been worked out in the complex caste system, suppose an extra-ritual reality that has to be found in the life and history of the Dalits. The *rta* supposes the historical domination and oppression of the Dalits; without this domination and oppression, the world order should not be able to organise our existence.

2. The Common Good of Dalits

Being untouchable is an affirmation that is primarily anthropological; it is an affirmation that defines a human being not to be part of the community of human beings that bear our self-understanding as human beings. This anthropological affirmation itself is an indirect expression of self-understanding. While people living in castes define their own role in reality in relation to a border between castes and - at the other side - casteless people, they define their human ‘nature’, with special interest to what they consider as a human body, in relation to other human bodies (in other varnas) but especially in relation to human beings who are considered as non-human bodies.

From that point of view, Dalits should not have any common good. The classical notion ‘common good’ is related ‘to the happiness (*eudaimonia*) which is the final end (*telos*) of all human striving, acting and living.10 There are as many ends as there are there are types of actions; they must be discovered in a hierarchy with respect to one another, contributing to and culminating in the highest ‘good.’ In the perspective of Aristotle, these goods and the highest good are intrinsically connected with a teleological approach of acting of all civilians in a well-ordered community. All the ends of these civilians are thought to be sub-ordinated to the final end - happiness. Therefore, the notion of the common good can be used as a

diagnostic device to evaluate the political ends a community and its civilians are aiming at. But, when a group of human beings is considered as non-human bodies, they cannot participate in the community's aims and ultimate happiness. Because of the very definition of their body, these human beings are simply not part of a community.

For many years, from the 1879 Missionary Conference onward, the Christian churches welcomed Dalits' mass conversions. The missionaries welcomed the Dalits wholeheartedly and chose to concentrate their energies to promote their spiritual and material welfare. But most of the time, they accepted the caste system and did not address the question of the struggles of the Dalit Christians for justice and dignity. From the eighties in the 20th century onward however there has been an important shift by turning attention to the actual Dalit base of the Indian Church and this has been done from the Catholic background as well as from the Protestant background. Dalit theologians have proposed new strategies in reading the Bible from a Dalit perspective. They want to give voice to the Dalit Christians from a 'liberative' perspective and want to strengthen the voices of 'twice-alienated' (K. Wilson) by theological projects that express a movement from prepositions to peoples (A. Nirmal).

To explain this idea at the basis of Dalit Theology, Nirmal refers - among others - to the Deuteronomic Creed (Dt. 26:5-9) saying that the liberation struggle of the Dalits is primarily a struggle for human dignity and the right to live as a free people - people created in the image of God. Nirmal explains that the ultimate goal of a Dalit theology is the realization of the full humanness of the Dalits, their full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in Dalits and the 'glorious liberty of the children of God'.

This kind of theological argument is a real deviation of the classic scholastic theological argument. While starting from a history of Dalit and Tribal peoples after 1947 and their political efforts to emerge in the Indian society from their age-old oppression, this type of theological argument is an interpretative one. It is a hermeneutical argument stating that fundamental biblical texts about God's dynamics and promise have to be understood from a specific local key: the life and history of the Dalits.

At this point the question that I have referred to in the first lines of this paper becomes an important one. Which keys are important in Dalit
liberation theologies? The question is whether Dalit theology should be oriented on theological criticism of economics and economy in the light of the massive poverty in India; or should it be primarily directed to a theological criticism of Indian cultures and their histories in so far as they suppress indigenous developments of especially tribal and Dalit cultural and religious expressions of life and history?

Because Dalit theology refers to people who are ritually impure in an absolute way and are the ratio essendi of the whole complicated system of castes and its rules of purity and impurity, the landmark of a specific Dalit theology has a cultural character as well as an economic character. Dalit theology refers to a question that is anthropological while it refers to a question about the foundation of a human body. So, Dalit theology has to overcome the dilemma mentioned between an economic starting point and a cultural starting point. The predominant question in Dalit theology has to be how the human body has to be defined and how these definitions are embedded in the fight against those social plausibility structures that hinder a change of the existing dominant definitions.

The question about the human body has to be approached with regard to the subject matter of God's friendship towards humans. From a theological perspective, the question of the human body can be defined as the question how the loving God, the highest good, can bestow his/her eternal blessedness on human beings? Thomas Aquinas' Christian ethics are based on the idea that the common good is the realisation of God's longing for eternal friendship between Him and people. Even while the relationship between God and humans is not a symmetric relationship but has the character of a mutual love and communication that communicates His happiness to us, God can bestow his relatedness to us on every body, also a non-autarchic human body. Autarkeia, the independence which for Aristotle was the hallmark of eudaimonia, is thus theologically recast. Dignity, based on independence of what others do or could cause is replaced by dignity based on reception. Respect, respicere (to look upon) from the viewpoint of the Catholic faith is not atomistic but begins from being accepted by God, and on that basis we receive one another. Being the expression of the common good, this respect for everybody is the diagnostic device to analyse the political domain of a well-ordered community.

12. Vosman, a.c. 46.
Theological recasting of the notion ‘common good’ is important for an emerging Dalit theology. As I have noticed, from a purely philosophical point of view, Dalits do not have a common good (because they do not participate in the community of free civilians) or they are declared to have a fundamental right to participate in the common good of all Indian civilians (as legislation states from 1949 onward). In the first case, the missionaries’ theology was oriented on ‘saving the souls’, or on reflecting social ministry programs as ‘preparation for the gospel’. In the second case, Dalit Christians are kept captured between their Christian identity and their backward situation.13

The notion ‘common good’, could be a device to act in the secular state that India is, as well in its multiform religious cultures. Among Catholics and Protestants, there is a growing awareness and preparedness to join together as Dalit Christians to struggle for their right. The many combined ‘dharnas’ (political demonstrations) in 1984-1995 against the discrimination of the Government have brought them closer. It is the common biblical vision of creating a new and just society that unites them together as people of God. These united efforts bring forth “a Dalit theology that emerges from Dalit Christians themselves and that seeks to find meaning for the struggles of all the Dalits ... in their emancipation from oppressive caste structures and social exclusion...”14 as Dr. Lourdusamy puts it.

The core concept of this ‘common good’ is the human body. In order to elaborate this argument, I would like to refer to a category that is launched by a former colleague of mine, the late Prof. Dr. Theo Beemer. I am referring to the category of ‘the birthright of the destitute’.

In the address given by Theo Beemer on the occasion of his stepping down as lecturer in moral theology on 6 November 1992, he said: ‘there is no such thing as pure theology; the inclusion of a non-theological but historically conscious social theory, and any sociological research emanating from it (such as research on processes of impoverishment), is essential in learning to recognize the human inclination towards God and the aversion from God in our history.”15 Theo Beemer derived the words ‘inclination’ and ‘aversion’ from Thomas Aquinas. In his theological outlook on practical

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13. ms. p 86 87.
14. ms. p 91.
15. T. Beemer, Het geboorterecht van de berooiden en de verborgen God, Nijmegen 1992 (farewell address), Nijmegen University
existence, the ultimate goal of each human being cannot be divided into a private and a communal domain. ‘The orientation towards the most universal good always contains the most subjective good.’ According to Theo Beemer, ‘this faithful orientation towards God does not so much require attention to the moral balance of each individual as much as a critical understanding of the social conflicts and possible improvements to which people feel drawn. He regards this ‘as a good way to search for the truth about God at the present time.”

Elsewhere I have argued that the common good, defined as the freedom and autonomy of the economic actor in the market, should be understood as a ‘capacity’ (Amartya Sen) or, better yet, as a series of capacities that are relatively autonomously imbedded in continuously developing social and political institutions. We have also proposed that the market be defined as an institution of free competition whose rules are based on a notion of inter-subjectivity. The freedom of the economic actor cannot be understood outside certain human and world views. Amartya Sen invites us to understand prosperity in terms of the concrete positive freedom that people experience in their socio-economic position and demonstrate in their activities. Prosperity, according to Amartya Sen, is primarily about someone’s ‘economic function’ potential: what someone can do or be in the economic community. The capacity to choose, according to Amartya Sen, cannot be separated from the concrete possibilities in which is embedded what the actors in this situation would regard as a useful life. Expressed in more ethical terms, this means that the idea of the eudaimonia (the bonum commune) is related, reciprocally and critically, to the scope of useful functions and capacities. Only concrete, useful functions and capacities can give meaning to the notion of ‘the good life’. The content of this category can only be formulated with the help of actual time - and culture - specific possibilities for leading a humane life. This particularity means that the ideal of ‘the good life’ is constantly changing. But whenever the meaning of ‘the good life’ is attached to the realisation of functions and capacities in the concrete markets within an actual

16. T. Beemer quotes these words from the philosopher W. Kluxen with approval in: T. Beemer, Een weg voor de beoefening van de moraaltheologie, in: Tijdschrift voor de beoefening van de moraaltheologie, 13 (1973) 374-390, 382.
17. Ibid., 383.
18 Compare T van den Hoogen and J. Peil, Visies op de markt: een markt van visies, in: E. de Jong (Ed.), Markt en waarden, op cit. 80-126
economy, the factuality of the economic reality is placed within a horizon that expresses a sense of that life. Designating this set of functions and capacities as ‘the good life’ suggests a coherence-creating correlation contained within it that comes to the fore. It becomes possible to state that a concrete set of functions and capacities are in the service of humanity.

In imagining humanity as horizon, religious traditions also occupy a meaningful place.\textsuperscript{19} Theologian Ignacio Ellucuria has clearly explained\textsuperscript{20} that a religious tradition has a utopian potential that is essential if we are to continue approaching any prevailing image of the \textit{bonum commune} critically. Without the ‘qualification’ with regard to the \textit{bonum commune} that issues from a religious utopia, its universal purpose threatens to become ideological. Ignacio Ellucuria explains that a religious utopia is the very thing that incites people to confront an idea of the \textit{commune bonum} with fundamental human rights. We see in this the deployment of the ideas that Theo Beemer develops in his farewell speech.

He also stresses the fact that the recognition of this birthright takes place nowhere else but in the light of a religious and prophetic perspective. He reasons that the invocation of the divinity of God in the book of Isaiah (Is. 45:15) and the mystagogy of the martyrs of Central America are the source of the recognition of the birthright of the destitute. This gives the category ‘birthright’ a fundamental and inescapable particularity that precedes all theoretical interventions. All eudaimonistic theories, and the economic translation of those theories, have a point of departure and basic criterion in the category of ‘birthright’. But he also thinks of the

\textsuperscript{19} Compare ‘In the social thinking of the Catholic Church, human dignity takes primacy over individual freedom of choice and autonomy [...] the deepest value of being human is ultimately not derived from the right to or power of self-determination [...] but the value of the human life as such is inviolable. This goes much further than the Kantian approach of human dignity, which is often the determining factor in discussions on human rights’ (B. Klein Goldewijk en V. Scheffers, ‘Het primaat van de sociale ethiek. Het sociale denken van de katholieke kerk in het perspectief van een rechtvaardige internationale orde’, in: E. de Jong (Ed.), \textit{Naar gelijkwaardige partners? Aanzetten tot een christelijk geïnspireerde visie op de positie van arme landen}, Assen: Van Gorcum, 1998, p. 24).

concept of ‘birthright’ in terms of corporality (a person is a bearer of rights because he/she is born of other persons). This gives it a universality that is pre-rational. Because Theo Beemer also thinks of birthright as a religious and prophetic category and as an experience of being, the word can also be understood as a critical point of departure with regard to every linguistic and reflexive elaboration of that idea in a code of rights that is part of our contextual understanding of the *bonum commune*.

3. Liberation from the Perspective of Dalit Theology

As I have elaborated in the previous section, the fundamental issue of a Dalit liberation theology is the interpretation of the human body, being as a core issue in the *bonum commune*. In this section, I want to clarify some other theological implications, especially in the field of fundamental theology.

I want to explain how the anthropological question we discussed in the previous section can be positioned in the framework of a theology of grace. This framework will shed light on anthropological question from the perspective of a theology of liberation.

The word ‘grace’ is a specifically Christian term in so far as it indicates the totality of God’s salvific and conciliatory concern for human beings that has been revealed in Jesus Christ. The Scriptures of the First and Second Testament use different terms and characterizations to indicate this concern. In the First Testament there are five concepts: among them *charan* (translated as: *charis*), meaning: one’s turning toward one’s fellow human being (*charis*: sweetness, charm), *hesed w’a emed* (reciprocity and faithfulness, corresponding with dignity and endurance). A second term is: *tsedaqa*, justice (understood as: the internal cohesion of human good deeds and the situation of well-being, respect). The fifth category is *rahamim*, tender, emotional love, compassion with anybody who is vulnerable. In the Second Testament, *charis* becomes the predominant central concept for ‘grace’. The word ‘grace’ itself becomes - from the epistolary Christian literature onward - a ‘technical’, summarizing word, esp. by St. Paul in particular. *Charis* refers to ‘faith in God’ and ‘faith in the coming Jesus Christ’. Paul relates it to ‘justification by God’s revelation in Christ’. In a

way, the concept *chans* becomes a kind of a Summa, the keyword in which all the connotations bunch together of the multiform experiences that can relate us to each other, to Jesus, to his Spirit and his Father.

Neo-scholastic theologies - that have overtaken liberation theologies - have elaborated this bunch of connotations in the scheme that was dominated by the conceptual pair 'natural/supernatural'. The concept of grace should refer to the supernatural reality of God that best should be conceived as separated from human reality and - in theology - knowable by exhaustive definitions. Leonardo Boff has characterised this neo-scholastic view on grace being a 'two-level' - model that stacks grace upon nature without any internal connection. Liberation theology as elaborated by Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff (and many others) has developed a totally different theory stating that there are different 'levels' in the reality that is indicated by the biblical concepts about God. These concepts refer to one, differentiated and ambiguous, reality of human beings and the other living creatures with which they habit on this earth. These biblical concepts offer a variety of characterisations of the manifold relations of God's mystery to this reality. Like my master in theology, the Dutch theologian Piet Schoonenberg said sometimes: the pluralism in biblical concepts - seen from an epistemological point of view - is 'on our side'. Theology cannot make clear observations about God's mystery.

Liberation theology has been part of an important shift in the theological paradigm in the second half of the 20th century. God's presence, being attuned in biblical metaphors, is a reality that can be experienced. Already years ago, Piet Schoonenberg pointed out the implications of this shift for anthropology. God's real involvement in human reality can be reconciled with (philosophical, social and economic) analyses of human freedom. Theologians had to leave neo-scholastic intention in theology to formulate 'universally valid insights'. The particular, local context of theological affirmations include that theological affirmations have to question critically all closed conceptions of reality. From a metaphysical as well as from a historical quest in reality, theology has to analyse our experiences of multiplicity and mutability in their relations to the mystery of God.

Because the human body is a fundamental issue in Dalit liberation theology, a core question is how the Dalit-body can be interpreted theologically (being a cue that refers to God's salvific and conciliatory concern for human beings), which consists of Dalits as well as non-Dalits.
From a Christian perspective, the birthright of the Dalits is founded on God’s initial and ultimate concern, God’s friendship towards them, like Thomas Aquinas would have put it. His grace is the grace of their bodies, God’s justice is the justice of their common good, and God’s friendship is the friendship of their solidarity.

From this starting point onward, it is possible to formulate a programme of theological research for the Centre for Dalit/Subaltern Studies. Perhaps, the programme can be differentiated along three lines, all of them elaborations of the anthropological quest that I have mentioned. The programme should have a central focus, the reconstruction of the Dalit body. In three lines, the reconstruction of the Dalit body should be approached and positioned in a theological-anthropological framework: the first line could be oriented on economic questions, the second line could be oriented on ethical questions, and the third line could be oriented on questions of spirituality.