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The Challenge of the Church of South India

to Other Churches and to the Ecumenical Movement

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The challenge of the C.S.I. is both to do certain things and to avoid certain others. This is only to be expected, seeing that the C.S.I. has been characterized by *Crockford* as a 'dangerous experiment which ought, nevertheless, to be tried!' ('Lambeth 1948' used the words 'heroic experiment'.) Tensions and anomalies there are, and indeed there must be, and they are neither few nor unimportant, but they are, for the most part, mostly reflexions of the tensions and anomalies present amongst the parent churches.

The primary challenge of the C.S.I. is perhaps by its very being—just because it exists and *lives*. Here, at long last, for the first time in Church History, is a union of episcopal and non-episcopal churches. Church union is thus removed from the realm of theory and discussion to that of fact and actuality. After all, other things being equal, it is not a united church that needs justification! And indeed not only its parents, but also its neighbours in North India are taking up the challenge.

Challenge to the Concept of Denomination

The C.S.I. throws a challenge to the very concept of denomination, for the C.S.I. is in the nature of an attempted return to the New Testament conception of the Church as the whole body of Christians, worshipping and witnessing, in a particular locality. During recent centuries, we have become so accustomed to, and even complacent about or proud of, different denominations calling themselves 'churches' in a non-New Testament sense, and functioning side by side, that we have ceased to regard the phenomenon as being abnormal. There is even growing up, along-side of and partly as a reaction to, the ecumenical movement, what has been called 'Confessional Imperialism', i.e. 'pan-denominationalisms' of different kinds, harmless enough if only for the purpose of deepening the understanding of their own heritage when 'conversing' with other denominations, but objectionable to the extent that they tend to rivet the bondage of the younger Churches and to create an ecumenical deadlock¹. The younger Churches, with their

¹ C. W. Ranson, 'The Church is the Mission', *N.C.C. Review*, June-July, 1952, p. 278.

one tells us that he has heard from another person that the river is in flood. We are not at all sure of the accuracy of this information. If he says that he has seen the river in flood with his own eyes we are more ready to accept his word. If we see for ourselves the flood in the river we are absolutely sure of the fact. No one can shake that certainty because it is based on direct perception. No *Anumana* can give us the same assurance. When we see the surrounding country inundated with water, we may surmise that the river is in flood. But this knowledge cannot possess the certainty which belongs to direct perception. The deep-seated longing of the human soul for the vision of God felt by many devout men and women all over the world has met its fulfilment in the Incarnation of Jesus. He lived as one of us, passing through the human experiences of joy, of sorrow, of suffering and of love. He was hungry, thirsty and tired like any one of us. He had friends whom He loved with tender and lasting passion. There were the Pharisees and the Scribes whose life and teaching He could not accept and He said so plainly without mincing words. He died on the Cross enduring the utmost agony of body and soul and thus revealed once for all the depth of God's love for mankind. It was in this way that God came into direct contact with men.

Early in the history of the Church, Christian teachers who commanded respect and exercised authority and were even known as Prophets began to teach that the Incarnation was not real. They failed to convince the Church of the soundness of their belief and therefore had to secede. They set out to spread their false doctrine. Their teaching was acceptable to a large number of people, even more so than the orthodox doctrine. They became known as the Docetists. They held that the body of Jesus was not real but only a phantom. There were two main reasons which led them to this belief. They said that all matter was evil and that Jesus, the Divine Incarnation, could not have taken on a real human body. They also could not believe that God actually suffered. He was above all suffering; to say that He suffered was incompatible with His greatness.¹

God did not reveal Himself only by a theophany such as is described in Exodus, Chapter xxxiii. It is not every one who sees a theophany. Men are endowed with various spiritual gifts. There are not many who are spiritually alert and sensitive enough to see a theophany. Further a theophany, however vivid, effective and self-authenticating, does not go far to reveal the goodness, justice and love of God. A theophany lasts but for a brief while. A mother's love is revealed through a long course of years by innumerable natural and spontaneous acts. Especially in times of crisis such as illness or misfortune, the mother's love is revealed. So is God's love revealed through a series of natural and spontaneous acts of love of the Incarnate Jesus, which reached their highest expression on the Cross.

The Incarnation, then, is the Christian answer to the human longing for a direct perception of God. True, the number of those who thus saw God in human form was quite limited. But the Gospels, written by those who came in direct contact with Him, have enshrined for all ages the Incarnate Jesus. Through these Gospels millions of men and women

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, pages xviii and xix.

have come to know and love God and Christ. The purpose of the Incarnation is to make God real to men. God is no longer a remote Deity unknown and inaccessible. Archbishop William Temple has written beautifully on this point: 'As we read the story, though it all happened long ago, we apprehend present fact. It is not only the record of a historical episode that we read: it is the self-expression of that God "in whom we live and move and have our being", so that whatever finds expression there, is true now, and the living Jesus who is "the same yesterday and today and for ever" still deals with our souls as He dealt with those who had fellowship with Him when He tabernacled among us. Our reading of the Gospel story can be and should be an act of personal communion with the living Lord.'¹

In saying that God's dealings with individuals and nations in the past as recorded in the Bible are of permanent significance for the religious life of mankind we are accepting a principle which prevails in every sphere of human thought and activity. The past is built into the present, whether in human experience or in civilization or in literature. The judgement of an old man is respected if he has garnered the wisdom which the years have taught him. All over the world when complicated problems arise and difficult situations have to be dealt with, the judgement of a man of considerable experience and ripe wisdom is sought. He has lived long; he has met many people; he is aware of numerous difficulties; and he knows how they have been solved. If he is a man of intelligence he would have learnt a great deal in the course of time. His varied contacts with different types of men would have instilled into him a spirit of caution. All these mean that the past is of immense value and sheds light on the present. As with individuals so with the human race. Every forward step which man takes is built up into the structure of human civilization. There can be no progress in science, education or culture if the past is forgotten and the achievements of our ancestors are not built upon. Every rung of the ladder of human progress we climb takes us up one step forward. All the achievements in modern science are the result of discoveries made by men of genius in the past which have been assimilated and have become a part and parcel of our modern life. When once the law of gravitation has been discovered it is not allowed to be forgotten. The great books of the human race are a permanent treasure. Civilizations may rise and fall, empires may flourish and decay, the fortunes of nations may change, but a precious book will never be allowed to perish. If a poet has enjoyed a sunrise and has described its glowing beauty in immortal verse it goes down the ages helping generation after generation of men to enjoy their sunrise better. We had in Calcutta a cultured Bengali friend who often called on us. One day he recited with deep feeling the description of a sunrise in Kalidasa's *Sakuntala*. This has been translated by Sir Monier Monier-Williams thus:—

'Oh the dawn has already broken.
Lol in one quarter of the sky, the Moon,
Lord of the herbs and night-expanding flowers,
Sinks towards his bed behind the western hills;

¹ William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, First Series, page 15.

While in the east, preceded by the Dawn,
 His blushing charioteer, the glorious Sun
 Begins his course, and far into the gloom
 Casts the first radiance of his orient beams.
 Hail! co-eternal orbs, that rise to set,
 And set to rise again ; symbols divine
 Of man's reverses, life's vicissitudes.
 And now,
 While the round Moon withdraws his looming disc
 Beneath the western sky, the full-blown flower
 Of the night-loving lotus sheds her leaves
 In sorrow for his loss, bequeathing nought
 But the sweet memory of her loveliness
 To my bereaved sight ; e'en as the bride
 Disconsolately mourns her absent lord,
 And yields her heart a prey to anxious grief.¹

This beautiful description of a sunrise has become a part of the literature of mankind. After we read it, we appreciate a sunrise far more because a great poet has enabled us to see beauty as we had not seen it before. His deep emotion, committed to writing, does not swamp our appreciation of a sunrise. It would be quite wrong of us merely to read beautiful descriptions of sunrise and not to see the sunrise itself. But we should certainly learn from the great poets to appreciate better a sunrise. Every valuable insight into the Divine Nature which God has given to man in the past, especially in the Bible, becomes an imperishable part of the spiritual heritage of man. We can no more afford to throw away the records of the past dealings of God with men than we can allow the works of Kalidasa or Shakespeare to be forgotten. The records of religion in the past in the Bible do not swamp our religion today ; they give it a depth and breadth which it otherwise might not possess.



God is not known so long as we believe what we are told about Him, nor even when we buttress this belief with reasons drawn from the wisdom of the ancient world. God is known only when He is met, and that is when He comes to meet us, whether it be in the assembly of His people, or in the reading or hearing of His Word, or in the midst of the storm where He appears and with His simple I AM casts out fear. The intuition of primitive man is not wholly astray, after all. In the tumult of the impersonal forces of nature and of history the personal presence of Christ is found. And Christian faith is simply the recognition of this encounter when it occurs. H. A. Hodges in *Reformation Old and New*.

¹ *Sakuntala*, tr. by M. Monier-Williams, p. 83.