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# The Ecumenical Movement and Christian Social Thought in India

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## I. ECUMENISM—THE SEARCH FOR WHOLENESS\*

### INTRODUCTION

The word 'ecumenical' (derived from *Oikoumene*=the inhabited globe) in Christian usage means the 'universal' as applied historically to the councils of the Catholic Church and geographically as belonging to the entire Christian Church throughout the world. When the late Archbishop Temple spoke of the ecumenical movement as 'the great new fact of our time', he was referring to the facts, both of the existence of the Church in all countries of the world, and the movement towards its unification.

The modern ecumenical movement may be defined as a movement towards the *wholeness of the Church*, a wholeness defined by the universality of Christ. Therefore the search for a fuller understanding of Jesus Christ (Christology) and consequently of the Church (ecclesiology) is integral to this movement. But since Christ is the fulfilment of God's purpose for the world and the Church the instrument of His mission in the world, one might speak of the ecumenical movement as engaged in a renewal of its theological understanding of the world, in which the Church is called as the Body of Christ to its universal mission.

The movement has three clear aims: *First*, it is concerned with the unity of the Church. As there is one Lord, there is one Church. Hence, it is a movement working for the healing of the divisions within the Church. Since unity should be defined, not by worldly expediency but by the truth of its own nature, this involves the common search for the essential faith and structure given by God in Christ to the Universal Church and necessary

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for its wholeness. *Second*, it is concerned with the world-wide mission of the Church to preach the gospel to 'every creature'. The unity which the Church seeks is a unity in and for the mission of the unfinished task of proclaiming the gospel of Christ to all men in all parts of the world and of inviting them to make their decision for Christ and to enter the fellowship of His Body. Here it is the mission of the Church to all mankind that determines its universality. *Third* (and this is the point we are dealing with, in these lectures), the ecumenical movement is concerned with the Church's call to witness to the gospel of Christ's salvation as being universal in the sense of comprehending 'all things' in heaven and earth and 'all of life'.

### JESUS CHRIST, THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

In any Christian discussion of the structure of social life, we are essentially dealing with Christ and His Church; and vice versa. Christ, the Church and the World have to be seen together, if we are to see any of them in the proper perspective.

Recent ecumenical thinking has given a great deal of emphasis on this integral relation of Christology (doctrine of Christ), ecclesiology (doctrine of the Church) and Christian sociology (defined in the wide sense of the Christian understanding of society). Mainly because the starting-point of all ecumenical social thought has been the universal Lordship or Kingship of Christ over the world. This immediately relates Christ, the world and the Church. Let me illustrate this by referring to the social thinking of the post-war Asian Church gatherings.

The Bangkok Conference of the East Asian Church leaders of 1949 enters their discussion of the Asian revolution with the doctrine of Christ's Lordship of the world and all life :

The Gospel proclaims that God's sovereignty includes all realms of life. Christ sitting at the right hand of God reigns and the Church owes it to the world to remind it constantly that it lives under His judgment and grace.

And in the Kuala Lumpur Assembly of the East Asia Christian Conference, the report on society defines its approach to the Asian revolution in terms of the Kingship of Christ over the world :

It (the Christian Gospel) is a gospel of the Kingship of Christ over the world. Therefore the meaning of world history including that of modern Asian history is to be discovered in that Kingship, which today is hidden, and will be revealed at the end of time. The Church must endeavour to discern how Christ is at work in the revolutions of contemporary Asia—releasing new creative forces, judging idolatry and false gods, leading peoples to a decision for or against Him, and gathering to Himself those who respond in faith to Him, in order to send them back unto the world to be witnesses to His Kingship. The Church must not only discern

Christ in the changing life but be there in it, responding to Him and making His presence and Lordship known.

For this reason, the report goes on to say that :

Our discussion as Christians about economics, politics and society are therefore conversations about Jesus Christ, that is to say, an attempt of faith to discern Him in the social change of our nations and to discover what it means to respond to Him.

This understanding of the relation between Christ, the world and the Church has found expression in several recent consultations on Religion and Society in India also. For instance, the Nagpur Conference of 1958 speaks of the need to interpret the modern cultural renaissance of India in the light of Christ's present Lordship and this goal of summing up everything on Christ.

The Christian lives by his faith in the Universal Lordship of Christ. It was He by whom all things were made, who at a particular moment in history became man. By his life, death and resurrection He has redeemed the world and reconciled man to God. This is the Lord who in all generations comes in judgment and in fulfilment to claim His own, and it is the purpose of God to sum up all things in Him. While we therefore believe that in sober fact, the redeeming work of Christ for all men is accomplished and that even now Christ reigns in the world, this reign is still hidden from the world and is perceived by faith.

Or again, the Nagpur Consultation of 1959 on International Affairs and World Peace says:

God has radically altered the direction and course of history in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . By the grace of God we know that already the world is redeemed, is at peace in Him. We *are* brothers for whom Christ died across every barrier of ideology, race and culture. This is our Faith . . . The Lordship of Christ is therefore not one more fact to be added to the facts of the present situation, as if the equation was: World plus Christ. He is not to be added as if He were a piece of data augmenting the primary data. Rather to know the Lordship of Christ is to know the world differently, to know it and see it from a radically different angle or point of viewing . . . He is the starting point, the primary datum in every relationship. He is between man and man. He is between man and society. He is the ground of all that is. All that is is in Him.

Just as there is an integral relation between our understanding of Christ and a true interpretation of the reality of the world, it is equally true that both have relevance to the search for the true structure of the Church. It is widely recognized that the 'social and cosmic' nature of Christ's salvation, and the Church's

mission to be the earnest and symbol of that salvation define the essential structure of the Church. Says Kuala Lumpur 1959 :

It (the Christian Gospel) is a gospel of redemption of the whole human race and of the whole created world. By His death and resurrection Jesus Christ has reconciled 'all things to Himself' . . . . His (God's) purpose is not to withdraw individual spirits one by one from their involvement with material things and human communities in order to set them in a 'purely spiritual' relation to Himself. Rather His goal is to 'unite all things in Him'.

It is this that gives sense to the idea and reality of the Church. In fact, one cannot see the relevance of the Church as an historical corporate institution with sacramental symbols unless we see God's purpose as including in its scope the whole world of history, institutions, society and natural powers.

The findings of the recent study of Rapid Social Change in India, after discussing the need for a renewal in the Church's understanding of the world of society, says that this

must necessarily involve a reappraisal of her (the Church's) nature and form. An awareness of the mission of the Church as co-extensive with the corporate life of men and the whole cosmos, must deepen the idea of the essential corporate character of the Church and the Church's witness. If sin includes the perversion of the structure of collective existence, politics, economics, society and culture and the misuse of man's mastery of nature, Divine Grace must mean the redemption of social structures and the restoration of man's sacramental relationship with the natural world. Therefore the Church being the witness to the Order of Grace should witness to these aspects of redemption within her own life. The Church has traditionally been defined as a people, a congregation, created by God around the Word and the Sacraments, with an essential order. This definition of the Church as a people of God among the peoples of the world receives new depth in the light of the Church's awakening to her social responsibility.

Bishop Newbigin in his famous book on the Church, *The Household of God*, at one point derives the nature of the Church from the destiny of the world in Christ :

The redemption with which He (God) is concerned is both social and cosmic and therefore the way of its working involves at every point the recreation of true human relationships and of true relationships between men and the rest of the created order. Its centre is necessarily a deed, wrought out at an actual point in history at a particular place. Its manner of communication is through a human community wherein men are reborn into a new relation one with another and become in turn the means of bringing others into that new relationship ; and through sacramental signs wherein

man is restored to a true sense of, and valuation of, the created world . . . The means which God employs for our salvation are congruous at every step both with the nature wherewith He endowed us when He created us and the world of which we are a part and with the end to which He leads us, which is that all things should be summed up in Christ.

In all these statements the main ideas are clear : (1) Christ is present in the world as its Lord, actively engaged in creating, judging and redeeming it. (2) Though this activity is hidden, the Church by faith can discern this presence and activity of Christ in the world. This discernment should express itself in a true interpretation of the world and its realities. (3) The mission of the Church is to remind the world that its Lord is Christ. The Church through its worship, preaching, service and fellowship, should be a sign of the Lordship of Christ which is present and prepare the way for its final manifestation in His second coming. As Bishop Stephen Neil says : 'The life of the Church is and always must be sacramental' till the final reality of the Kingdom makes it unnecessary.

#### NEW EMPHASES NECESSARY IN INDIA

The 1948 Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches stated self-critically that, in the past, on the whole they (the Churches) have often concentrated on a purely spiritual, other-worldly or individualistic interpretation of their message and their responsibility.

This is in large measure (perhaps one should say) particularly true of the Missions and Churches in Asia. Kuala Lumpur 1959 speaks of the Asian Churches' 'failure to recognize the lay mission of the Church and Church's direct involvement in the world for the sake of witness' ; and it adds :

The inheritance of a pietistic Christian tradition coupled with escapist tendencies already inherent in the Asian religious traditions have to be counteracted.

There is need to correct lopsidedness by emphasizing some forgotten aspects of the redemption of Christ which are very relevant for the new society in India. Let me mention a few of them :

*Firstly*, there is need in India today to emphasize that Christ's redemption is a gospel of *consecration of the material world and the powers of nature*. In India, as elsewhere in Asia, the people are seeking material security, and higher standards of living through planned industrialization. What is the Christian evaluation of this urge for increased material productivity and abundance of things? Asking this question, the Kuala Lumpur Assembly 1959 of the East Asia Christian Conference says :

Many in the Church tend to dismiss this as materialistic. It is true that man does not live by bread alone. But it must

be affirmed strongly by the Churches that economic welfare is a necessary means of the good life. It becomes materialistic when it is conceived as the end of life. Looked at in this perspective, the search for material security and economic justice, which is a basic drive in Asia, may become a sign of the abundant life which Christ has promised. With wrong spiritual motivation, it may also become a curse.

St. Paul warns Timothy that the teaching which forbids marriage and enjoys abstinence from food is a heresy and affirms that preaching of the Word of God and the worship of God (prayer and thanksgiving) sanctify (consecrate—R.S.V.) created things : 'For every thing created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for then it is consecrated by the Word of God and prayer'. It is this that the sacraments, more especially the sacrament of Holy Communion, proclaim. The consecrated elements, as means of Grace and of Christian fellowship in worship, symbolize the fact that the Church looks forward to the final consecration of all material things, and all powers of nature.

It is right and relevant to speak in this context of the consecration of modern science and technology and of industrial life through the gospel of Christ.

*Secondly*, we must present the gospel of Christ in India today as *victory over the cosmic powers of evil*, that is the forces of spiritual perversity which have found their abode in corporate historical human existence, expressing themselves in systems of thought, imagination and worship which drive men to evil, often in spite of their individual wills. Many Biblical scholars have argued that St. Paul in speaking of 'principalities and powers' and 'the elemental spirits of the universe' has been speaking of these demonic structures of evil, represented by the many 'lords and gods' of his period. Even if there is a great deal of demythologization of 'demons' in our age, there is little doubt that much of the fanatic religious fury of the traditional communalism and the modern ideologies cannot be understood solely in terms of the ill-will of individual men involved in it ; there is a dimension here of spiritual structures, nourished by the idolatrous worship of men. We may illustrate from the toughness of the caste system in India. A recent consultation on caste in India, after speaking of the economic and social aspects of caste, said :

Lastly, and perhaps more important than the other two, the common use of the term, 'the demon of caste,' points towards the truth that caste and allied structures are more than sociological in character, that they have spiritual roots ; and they have the sanction of traditional religion. Therefore, until there is a sufficiently dynamic spiritual motivation to destroy the old and reconstruct the new, the hold of the old demons will resist social changes.

Maybe the phrase, 'demons of caste', is used figuratively, but it points to a spiritual focus of evil which cannot be comprehended in purely economical, sociological or even cultural terms.

Lest it appear that this emphasis on the demonic is too much of a surrender to some of the Continental theologians, let me quote from H. A. Hodges, *The Pattern of Atonement* :

False gods are no mere fantasy. They are real and dangerous powers . . . Every human fantasy which has become fixed in a formula and focused in an image and is capable of obsessing the mind, every false purpose dwelt upon as a longing, crystallized as a habit and so ruling the will, provides a dwelling-place into which powers, more deeply sunk in falsehood and sin than we, can enter and dwell . . .

It is thus that we must analyse all pagan gods . . . When paganism is dead and the very names of the old gods are forgotten, intellectual, social and political movements serve their purpose no less well, and today the demonic power in these things is clearly manifest.

In the villages and among the tribals many missionaries presented the gospel as the message of victory over demons ; and it meant liberation. There is need for the same message in terms of the more sophisticated demons of our scientific and secularized age.

*Thirdly*, the Christian gospel must be presented in India today as the source of the *renewal of social institutions and structures*. It is one of the fallacies of our individualistic age that we think that social institutions are created by individuals through contract. And individualistic Christianity has, therefore, spoken of change of social institutions through changed individuals. There is no doubt a half-truth here ; but its one-sided emphasis has made it false. It must be recognized that society and its institutions are integral to the nature of man from the beginning and they have an existence independent of man's individuality. With the emergence of socialism, this recognition has led people to overemphasize the other half-truth, that individuals are creatures of social groups ; and thus we get collectivism reacting against individualism. But the truth is that society and its essential structures cannot be understood except as part of the fundamental givenness of things ordained by God in creation or for preservation. If they are so, then the gospel of Redemption means a renewal of social institutions and structures, apart from the spiritual rebirth of individuals, though no doubt related to it.

The gospel is God's word of judgment and renewal of the institution of family, the economic order, the pattern of society and the structure of the State.

*Fourthly*, Christianity should declare Jesus Christ as the *revelation and fulfilment of the meaning of history*. This is an age of historical dynamism which brings with it a sense of historical purpose, giving rise to powerful movements based on different



kinds of Messianism. Scientific rationalism, democratic humanism, dialectical materialism, nationalism, fascism—all these have tremendous appeal because of their interpretations of history, which open for men a path of participation in the fulfilment of historical destiny. Here the recovery of Christian eschatology, which sees the fulfilment of 'end' of history, the Kingdom of God, in the movement defined by the two poles of Jesus Christ Risen and Jesus Christ Coming Again, is of tremendous social significance.

It is significant that the Kuala Lumpur Assembly of the East Asia Christian Conference in its report on Church and Society (as already noted) placed primary emphasis on the Kingship of Christ as the clue to 'the meaning of world history including that of modern history'.

In India, the sense of history and the emergence of historical dynamism are beginning to make their impact on the static concepts and structures of society. And it is important that the Church today emphasizes that Christ is the alpha and omega of universal human history.

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