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Christian Confessions of Jesus of Nazareth

A Consolidated Report of the General Sessions of the Conference and of some of the Discussions during the Conference

Introductory Session: Paper of Fr Legrand.

The discussion that followed raised particularly the question of the place that should be given to two recent developments in N.T. Research: The Targumic approach, and the impact of structural analysis. It was argued that the impact of structural analysis may be very great indeed. Its stress on a synchronical, rather than diachronical, approach, may bring N.T. research closer to the exegetical methods of the Indian tradition. But on the whole, the application of the method to the Biblical texts is still at the initial stage and it may be too early to make an assessment. As regards the present blossoming of Targumic studies following upon the discovery of the Neofiti Codex, it certainly provides the N.T. scholar with an important new tool, along with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Nag Hammadi papyri, the gnostic texts, etc. But it cannot be said that these discoveries have raised new Christological issues.

First Day (29.12.1974)

Theme: 'Jesus: Freedom-fighter or Prince of Peace?'

In the discussion the following points were made:

1. The recent emphasis on Jesus as liberator shows a return to the Jesus of history and thus is burdened with the old problems of the quest of the historical Jesus. Hence the question must be widened.

The involvement of Jesus with political affairs remains ambiguous. The general result of research rather seems to point to a certain distance from the political field and from actual social situations. Jesus' concern is man, his new life in God's Kingdom, which surely implies new relations to society, and imposes on men the responsibility of bringing about social and political conditions which correspond to human dignity and freedom. In the concrete execution of such demands not only Jesus in His earthly life can be normative, but the living apostolic community of the church, which realises in its new situation the life of the Spirit sent by Jesus Christ. So it seems that already in the book of Revelation we encounter more concern for actual political situations.

2. What then is the meaning of freedom in Jesus' life and preaching? The relation of inner freedom to exterior conditions as it is revealed in His life and preaching must be thoroughly investigated.

Freedom concerns the total man and must extend to all realms of his personal life, and of society. It is the unique gift of God foreshadowed in the liberation of Israel from their bondage to Pharaoh, and again from exile; but in the prophetic message, and ultimately in Jesus Christ it is increasingly understood first of all as the freedom of the inner man from Law, Sin and Death and as man's renewed existence in God's kingdom. If Jesus, and after Him the church, foremost Paul, proclaims freedom, the primary concern is man himself: a freedom to be found through conversion and turning to Jesus Christ in faith. This freedom coming from God implies a new relation to the neighbour and the responsibility to a new structure of society so that they give room to each man to live his life in the dignity of a son of God. Thus the N.T. would not support the idea that a primary concern of the church is to change structures, or to fight against exterior bondage. A mere fight for social political freedom which would not change man himself would result merely in the change of role between lords and slaves, not in a renewal of relationship and society. Some, however, felt that the gospels reflect an immediate involvement of Jesus in social and political conditions.

3. If then Jesus in a mission from his Father offers us freedom in a new way, to shape history and to work out our destiny, the question arises in what way God himself is involved in the history of mankind. He is surely present through the ages among all people. But there are models through which he achieves his own ends. These are the models of service, foreshadowed in the suffering servant, fulfilled in the kenosis of Jesus, revealed in the self-effacing love that surrenders life, to give it to us. These models are opposed to machineries of power, be it political, social or economic, by which men are not awakened to freedom but enslaved in oppressive structures, exploited and manipulated by others. Thus God reveals himself in Jesus as one who stands entirely on the side of man, supporting his dignity, calling him to service in love.

4. The level on which Jesus works for man's liberation and on which the Christians and the Church have to continue Christ's mission is, therefore, the inner man from whose liberation and renewal a new society is to be born. It was in this complex that the question of the use of violence in the struggle for liberation was discussed. Though on the practical level no full consensus was reached, it was clear that the model of liberation, set up by Jesus, is that of the prophetic witness which in the situation of ultimate conflict chooses rather to be killed than to kill. It is only in faith that this model can be accepted by the Christian in absolute trust in God who has built his world and its growth on the mystery of kenosis, that only out of death, life can be renewed.

Second Day (30.12.1974)

Theme: 'Jesus: Cosmic Christ or a Man of History?'

The following issues were brought up in the discussion:

1. It is legitimate and possible to admit a pluralistic expression of Christology. The terminology may differ. Whereas N.T. scholarship usually speaks of different Christologies, in theological language it is deemed more appropriate to speak of the differences of emphasis in Christology.

2. When we say 'cosmic Christ', we mean (a) that Christ is the pattern and goal of what the whole universe can become: (b) that His redeeming work has a cosmic, all-embracing effect: (c) that He is in control of all the cosmic powers: (d) that Christ is ontologically pre-existent: (e) that He is the eschatological reality towards which all religions point and move.

3. But sometimes it may be necessary to speak of Christ only as a sign, not a goal. God is the goal at which men arrive through Christ. Though popular piety and modern devotional literature tend to be more Christocentric, most Christian tradition is theocentric. A theocentric approach will be more fruitful in conversation with men of other faiths.

4. The historical Jesus has a central place in witnessing. Before Jesus can be presented as Christ, His teaching, deeds and attitudes must be witnessed to. Jesus as a man of history is very important in the theological task of India as it is not an idea with which we are primarily concerned but a concrete event in history. The right understanding of incarnation, creation and history is vital for the theological task in the Indian context.

5. In some exclusive Hindu thought Ishwara has only a tentative status as reality. Brahman is the ultimate reality. Identifying Jesus Christ with Ishwara means that he is assigned to a secondary order of reality. One way of overcoming this difficulty is to see Jesus Christ as the Saguna Brahman, the ultimate reality turned towards man, as different from the Nirguna Brahman, the ultimate reality in itself.

6. There are many areas in which we can cooperate with men of other faiths. The basis of such cooperation is not their confession of Christ, but our confession of Christ and the fact that we are 'in Christ'. As such we are part of His recreated humanity with a freedom and commitment to join with others in areas of social work, political involvement, efforts at integration, reconciliation and peace.

Once we recognise the Cosmic Christ at work in His universe, we should rejoice in the progress and transformation happening in all religions and all spheres of human life.

Third Day (31.12.1974)

Theme: 'Jesus: the Christ of mystical union or the Prophetic Christ?'

The discussion of this theme was handicapped by the absence of any paper dealing directly with the Christ of mystical union, which was felt all the more because just on the topic of mysticism quite

different conceptions prevailed. Further, this topic came close to pastoral problems of church involvement, so that the discussion tended to drift into realms of practical attitudes and approaches rather than to the establishment of principles.

The following themes were taken up in the discussion:

1. The nature of mysticism. Much of our conception of mysticism is affected by Hellenistic ideas which originated in Platonism and profoundly influenced patristic and medieval mysticism. It is based on a dualistic conception of the world, with the sphere of matter, of human experiences and events, as transient and hence to be transcended; and the realm of the eternal as the object of contemplation. Mysticism, then, means withdrawal from the actual world, from decision-making and involvement, into the timeless realm of the spirit. Indian mysticism often has similar features.

However, Jesus gave mysticism a new meaning. For Him God is not the timeless object of contemplation, but the Father who loves the world and sent his Son for our salvation; to love his Father means also to love all men; to be obedient to his Father means to fulfil his mission and finally to lay down his life for men. His unique union with his Father (expressed in the Abba-word) ties him to the world; his mystical union implies involvement in his earthly task.

In Jesus Christian mysticism has found a new pattern (examples are Paul, Ignatius of Antioch, Francis of Assisi. . .etc). It implies intimate union with God and commitment to the earthly mission, so that God is the constant source of inspiration and strength in the fulfilment of this task.

2. Thus in Jesus mysticism and prophetism are not opposed to each other, but are the two poles of His life and work. His prophetic mission means involvement and proclaiming God's kingdom, in conflict, in passion and death; but this mission originates from the union with his father and is constantly nourished by it. Both aspects of Jesus Christ have to be realised in the Church.

3. The prophetic word is always related to the actual situation. It is first directed to the Church herself, inspiring and orientating her in her mission, judging her in her failure if she becomes an obstacle to God's designs. The church must be attentive to the voice of the Spirit calling her to renewal (through whatever channels the Spirit may speak). It also guides the Church in assessing the actual situation of the world in which she has to carry out her mission so that she may be able to play her prophetic role. While the Church as a whole has the assurance of the Holy Spirit, his gifts are distributed freely among the believers. The charisma of prophetism must be matched by the charisma of discernment to distinguish the movement of the Spirit from merely natural impulses.

4. The Spirit of God is operative also outside the Church. It is important for the Church to recognise his working in the movements and aspiration of the world in which we live, so as to fulfil her prophetic role. In fulfilling this mission she will also have to suffer.

5. In connection with Fr Wijngaards' paper much attention was paid to the meaning of silence: God's silence while the world runs its course is a challenge to man; so is Jesus' silence in his passion. There is also deep significance in human silence; in waiting for God; in acceptance of the incomprehensible; in deep union with him; also in intimate sharing with fellowmen. In our time of inflation of words in speech and print the value of words can be safeguarded only if our speech rises out of silence. The need of training in silence was stressed.

6. The Church in India is called to follow both the Jesus of mystical union and the prophetic Jesus. In accordance with India's ancient traditions the Indian Church must be and appear as a Church of intimate union with God. This union, however, will not separate her from the life-stream of development, and from the efforts of the nation in its struggle for progress in all spheres of human life. It is her peculiar mission in our world to unite both: the closeness to God and responsibility for the people.

Fourth Day (1.1.1975)

Theme: 'Jesus: Christ of the Atonement or Christ the New Man?'

The following issues were raised at the plenary session:

1. The phrase 'New Man' is never used directly of Jesus Christ in the N.T. But it is appropriate to call him so as from the total evidence Jesus of Nazareth the crucified and risen is the new man. It will be wrong to think that only after the resurrection he became the new man. He was the new man in so much as he identified himself with fallen humanity and also showed in his life and resurrection the potentialities available for man.

2. It is the body of Christ, the Church, which is referred to as the 'New Man' in the N.T. Christ creates 'the New Man', the new humanity, the goal towards which all mankind is moving.

3. The new humanity concept is related to material progress and development. It was remarked that development is an inadequate concept and is more dynamically expressed in terms like 'liberation'. The material well-being of man is part of the self-fulfilment process, the becoming of the new man, for in it man's legitimate wishes and aspirations are fulfilled. The mere fulfilling of material needs may boost up the old ego and has therefore an ambiguous role.

4. The new man is the man who empties himself of selfishness and pride; he is the 'kenotic man' who is available fully for others.

5. There is a need to study further the relationship of the quest for the new man in India with the Biblical understanding and theological reflection on the New Man.
