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Salvation Today?

STEPHEN NEILL

THE BANGKOK ASSEMBLY of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism was a significant event in Church history. Its documents and reports demand the most careful theological study and analysis both by those who are likely to agree and by those who are almost certain to disagree with everything that was said or written. This task of theological analysis is by no means easy.

Those who were present at the Assembly have declared that it was a deep spiritual experience and they are certainly speaking the truth. But this experience was in the main emotional. The emotional content of the documents is high, and the intellectual content correspondingly low. Perhaps no world Christian assembly in history has ever been convened on so impoverished an intellectual basis. Participants foresaw that it would be very difficult to convey to the Churches what really happened; conclusions based on rational argument can be conveyed in words, emotional impressions cannot. In consequence even the most sympathetic interpreter, working solely on written records, is liable to be told that he has misunderstood the whole thing, and has misrepresented what actually took place. This is a risk that has to be taken.

The Director's Report

WE start naturally with the report of the Director, Dr. Philip Potter, who has since become General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. This being a key-note address should have been very carefully prepared in consultation with colleagues. Unfortunately it shows in every paragraph signs of hasty and careless preparation.

It is curious that . . . in the Second World War against Fascism, many missionaries either left their posts to fight against Germany or Japan or encouraged Christians to pray for the victory of the cause of righteousness—their cause (p. 55).

Many? How many is many? Not a shred of evidence is offered for this remarkable statement. I spent five years of war in India. I know of only one missionary out of thousands who left his work to join the armed forces; his reasoning was that a more forceful Christian witness could be borne among Indian troops by a serving officer who shared their hardships than by one who was officially styled 'chaplain'. I did not regard his reasoning as convincing; I could not regard his motive as contemptible.

The real error was to assume that the process of secularisation would lead to the withering away of religious consciousness—the same mistake was made at the Jerusalem Conference (of 1928) (p. 56).

Here Dr. Potter simply has not done his homework. The great men of Jerusalem were not such illiterates as he supposes. An immense amount of harm has been done by the improper use of the term 'secularisation' in place of the correct term 'desacralisation' for the replacement of the mythological by the scientific view of the world. The men of 1928 knew what words mean and used them in their correct senses. Secularism meant in 1928 and means in 1973 the purpose of removing from the human consciousness everything other than the three-dimensional, and of destroying everything to which the term 'spiritual' in any sense of that word can be applied. The secularists have not had as much success as they hoped; but everyone who has contact with young people in many parts of the world knows that for many of them *the* problem is that of entertaining the possibility that anything can exist which cannot be counted, measured or weighed by the processes of physical science.

Partnership has long been conceived as the proper method of carrying out mission and evangelism. This was given full expression at Whitby 1947.

Here again Dr. Potter has not done his homework. Whitby 1947 did *not* speak of 'partnership' but of 'partnership in obedience', a very different thing. It was recognised that obedience to the will of God would mean different things for churches in varying stages of development. The Willingen Conference of 1952 was planned as a conference of the richer churches, at which they should consider exactly what obedience would mean for them in a changed situation. Dr. D. T. Niles put an end to all that, and the planned Conference has never yet been held.

Those who by intention or neglect have enjoyed the benefits of institutional violence (p. 55). (It is to be noted that there are considerable differences between the report of this speech in *Bangkok Assembly 1973* and that given in *International Review of Mission* April 1973; no indication is given of the differences.)

It is difficult to give any intelligible meaning to the expression 'institutional violence'. Karl Marx acutely observed that every state, in-

cluding Switzerland the hospitality of which Dr. Potter has enjoyed for a number of years, is institutional violence. With characteristic naiveté he supposed that with the adoption of Marxist principles the state would wither away; Christians, being both tougher and more realistic than Marxists, have not shared in such roseate expectations for the future of the human race. African states are much more violent than European. Kenya, unlike Britain and Switzerland but like the Union of South Africa, has abolished neither the death penalty nor corporal punishment. I wish that it would abolish both. But would I be justified in starting a violent campaign in favour of the abolition of violence?

Dr. Rossel's Report

FURTHER detailed analysis would become tedious. It is a relief to turn from this indifferent piece of work to the report by Dr. Jacques Rossel on 'The Implications of the Conference on Salvation Today for CWME'. This is the only one among the papers and reports that I have seen which gives evidence of a capacity for serious theological thought, and for a realistic appraisal of contemporary situations. By the expression in his last paragraph 'There may be others, young or old, who have joyfully adjusted to the new situation and are in fact already the missionaries of the new era,' Dr. Rossel reveals his awareness that much World Council thinking, so far from leading the thinking of the Christian world, is already twenty or thirty years behind it.

But even Dr. Rossel can err. He writes: 'Both Catholic and Protestant mission agencies were not supported directly by the churches to which they were related but by relatively small groups of interested persons within these churches' (p. 68). Dr. Rossel is writing of course from the point of view of Switzerland; but what he writes was never true of Scotland, largely untrue of Canada and the United States of America, and only very partially true of England. This shows again how important it is that papers of this kind should be read by someone familiar with the subject before being committed to the hazards of print.

Dr. Thomas' Report

DR. M. M. THOMAS, on 'The Meaning of Salvation Today' is as always fresh and interesting (*International Review of Mission*, April 1973, pp. 158-169) but he has here said little that he has not said many times before. And his paper becomes really challenging just where it stops; having raised briefly three controversial issues he comes to a sudden end with the remark: 'I leave all these unanswered questions for

this conference of experts to tackle,' which is hardly playing fair, especially when this last page is so provocative. Let us look at one point only. 'If the above is true, and salvation in Christ is conceded outside the Church' (p. 168).

What is a theologian to make of a statement like this? I think that what Dr. Thomas means, put in theological terms, is something like this: 'It may be that in the past we have drawn the boundaries of the Church too narrowly. We know where the centre of the Church is, in Christ the eternal Word. But we are not in a position to define exactly where the Church comes to an end. God may have means of which we know nothing to link to himself seekers who are in no way linked to the visible Church.' The word *Christ* is a historic word; it links our faith to the growing purpose of God revealed in Israel, and to one historic person, who lived at a known and identifiable time, and to no other. Does it not land us in hopeless theological confusion to suggest that those who have never heard of him have found salvation *in Christ*?

It is this lack of theological precision and clarity, evident in almost every paper and every report that I have seen, that makes it so difficult to reach a theological evaluation of what was said and done at Bangkok. Again and again one gets the impression that much more was meant than was said, and that aim of the reports was rather to paper over cracks than to bring out into the open the deep differences that existed among the members of the Assembly.

Violence

IT appears to be assumed at almost every point that violence is an acceptable form of Christian activity: 'unjust systems of government which leave people with *no other course* than that which has been used throughout the ages—violence' (p. 55). The World Council of Churches by its decision to support Frelimo and other similar movements has declared open war on the only governments which exist in South Africa, Rhodesia and the Portuguese territories in Africa, though sometimes it confuses the issue by speaking of war as though it was a form of peace. The attitude of the leaders is naturally a little defiant, since they know that many, perhaps a majority, of the most thoughtful and ecumenically-minded Christians in the world deplore this decision. Others regret that the World Council, by taking up its own bitterly racist attitude (anti-west, anti-white, but not apparently anti-Marxist), has undermined its capacity to fulfil its proper function of bringing forcibly to the notice of all the Churches all the points of view which are strongly held by Christians anywhere in the Christian world. (I have not found any reference in the documents to the ferment which is going on within the Dutch Reformed Church in South

Africa.) Yet others feel that such a decision was premature, since so little theological thought has been devoted to the problems of violence and non-violence.

Prescient Christians began to warn us a considerable time ago that this would be the principal problem by which the churches would be faced in the last third of the twentieth century. India has completely abandoned the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. At the time of the rape of Goa Mr. Nehru honestly stated that 'non-violence is not a creed by which one can live in the modern world.' What should be the attitude of Christians in the violent world of today? I pleaded with the World Council to adopt this as the sole theological subject of the Uppsala Assembly of 1968 and to make a thorough job of it. No notice was taken of this request, indeed my communication was never even acknowledged. It is very late in the day to begin now; but surely intensive study ought to be carried out in preparation for the Assembly of 1975; if that Assembly fails to give a clear lead to the Churches, it may be judged that it would have been better if it had never met.

Power

A KINDRED theme is that of power. Once again Dr. Rossel brings commonsense to bear on the question:

The first Plenary of the reflectors on power revealed how unclear we are as to the nature of power and its use for salvation . . . we know very little about the proper use of power by the churches and by groups of Christians, and still less of the use by churches and groups of political power (pp. 65-66).

This touchingly honest admission reminds us again of the lamentably amateurish character of the preparations for this Assembly. When we find Section II affirming, again without any supporting evidence, that 'We will produce no economic justice without participation in, and use of, economic power. We will win no political freedom without participation in, and discriminating use of, political power' (IRM, 1973, p. 201), we are bound to ask ourselves whether this view is derived from the New Testament or from the Teachings of Chairman Mao. Or is Chairman Mao, as some think, the best contemporary interpreter of the teaching of the New Testament?

Dialogue

DIALOGUE with men of other faiths, is much stressed in these pages as a method of missionary work. But here too a little clarification is necessary. Are we talking about dialogue or about amiable discussion with a view to mutual illumination? Both of these are

valuable; but it must be recognised that they are two entirely different and separate things. Anyone brought up in the Platonic tradition of dialogue knows well the intense seriousness involved; Socrates and his interlocutors are concerned about one thing only—that the truth should emerge. This is the concern of the Christian partner in dialogue. If Christ is the Truth, then the only thing that matters is that Christ should emerge; but Christ as the Truth makes categorical demands on the individual for total, unconditional and exclusive commitment to himself. It may well be that I may discover in dialogue how inadequate my own self-commitment is; but, out of respect for the freedom and dignity of the partner, I may not hope and ask for him anything less than I ask and hope for myself. As experience shows, it is extremely difficult to find in any of the non-Christian religions and anti-religions a partner who is prepared to engage in dialogue on this level of seriousness.

What the passages on dialogue in these reports seem to be talking about is in reality not so much dialogue as something else. 'Members of the group testified to their own experience of the clarification of the Christian faith and the crystallisation of expression resulting from the the questioning and probing of their partner in dialogue' (p. 78). It would be impossible to express better the nature of what I have called amiable discussion with a view to mutual illumination. But this is not new. It was being practised two hundred and fifty years ago by the very first Protestant missionary in India, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg.

Identity and Culture

THERE is much in these pages about identity and culture. Here again I plead for much clearer definition of what is meant. I have looked in vain for any clear statement of the obvious biblical truth that the Christian is always a stranger and a pilgrim; he is to find his identity in Jesus Christ. He is bound always to be to some extent a rebel, and a critic, in the name of Christ, of every culture. He can never identify himself wholly with any culture, even if it claim the name of Christ, since Christ is the judge of cultures no less than of individuals, and all in his sight come short of the glory of God.

This needs to be plainly stated at the present time. Our greatest danger in Africa is tribalism. One Kenyan leader has of late been proclaiming aloud the need for a purely tribal Kikuyu Presbyterian Church, with which no one else is to have anything to do. If, in this frame of reference, the question is asked, Can I be Kikuyu and Christian? (p. 70), the answer must be emphatically 'No'. Tribalism is the primal sin of Africa. It must be wholly cast out, if any African is to be truly Christian. African leaders have rightly blamed missionaries for being in the past too closely identified with Western ways

of thinking and living. Having successfully cast out the mote from their brother's eye, they have remained gloriously unaware of the beam in their own eye.

There are diversities of culture, and the Christian judgment on all of them will not be the same. There are cultures containing elements to which the Christian as such must be ruthlessly and irreconcilably opposed. For example, Hinduism *as it is today* subjects eighty million people, in spite of legal enactments to the contrary, to the daily and frightful menace of untouchability (I do not find any reference to this in the papers and reports before me). The facts are well known and are daily reported in the Indian papers. In such a system, as it exists today, no Christian can be at home. Marxism *as it is today* 'denies to each person the inalienable right to personhood' (p. 13, though this was not written about Marxism, and there are not many references to Czechoslovakia). There is much in the teaching of Karl Marx which justifies the title of Lex Miller's book *The Christian Significance of Karl Marx*. But to Marxist tyranny, as it exists today, the Christian cannot but be inexorably opposed. It was Martin Niemöller, by no means a bitter opponent of Marxism, who remarked after a visit to Russia, 'The problem in Russia is simply that of remaining human.'

There are other cultures which have deep roots in the Christian Gospel. No one is likely to pretend today that Great Britain is a Christian country; but what the Englishman needs is simply to be brought back to the roots of his own culture, and to find there the transforming power that he needs. This must steadily be borne in mind in all discussion of 'cultural identity'.

On the other hand, every Christian should be deeply concerned about the culture of his country or people, whatever it may be. I can hardly be accused of being indifferent in this matter, having spent twenty years so immersing myself in Tamil literature and culture that after thirty years I am still regarded as something of an authority on the subject. My great failure as a teacher in the University of Nairobi, shared by my colleagues, is that we have none of us yet been able to persuade any student to bring a copy of any translation of the New Testament in any African language to any class in the exegesis of the New Testament. It is we who are interested in the African languages and not the students.

Pluralism

PLURALISM is another of the jargon words, now popular in ecumenical circles, to which rather careful scrutiny has to be directed. What does it mean? 'This pluralism has also become a factor within Christianity itself, though this is reluctantly recognised by many and is regarded with horror by others' (p. 61). This is a typically silly remark,

to which it is almost impossible to attach any meaning at all.

If 'pluralism' means simply that it is now recognised that non-Christian systems will not fade away as quickly as the nineteenth century expected, and that four systems—Hinduism, Buddhism, Marxism and Islam will exist beside Christianity for a very long time, this is true, but so obvious as hardly to need saying. But if, as seems often to be the case, 'pluralism' is interpreted as meaning that at least these five co-exist as equally permanent and equally valid ways for the human spirit to approach the one true God, the Christian is bound on biblical grounds to demur. But there is no doubt at all that the ecumenical proclamation of pluralism is taken by the Hindu in exactly this sense and enthusiastically welcomed. 'Now at last the claim to Christian and Western superiority is at an end. The Christians themselves have abandoned the idea that there is anything special in Christianity, and no longer make the claim that any man should leave the religion in which he was born for any other. The exclusive claim of Jesus Christ has always been the stumbling block to the Hindu; now that this claim has been abandoned by the Christians themselves, Jesus Christ is warmly welcome to a place in the Hindu pantheon as one of the many Saviours of India.' The younger Hindus, however, perhaps a little shrewder than their sires, say quite openly to the ecumenical Christian, 'We really liked the old missionaries better. We knew that they wanted to convert us. You say you don't, but we still think that you do.'

Salvation

THE title of the Assembly was *Salvation Today*. It may seem that we have taken a long time to come to this central issue; but it is, in fact, only on p. 102-103 that the Assembly itself tries 'to know what is the aim of our mission'. It might have been thought that this would come on p. 1. But here it is. The third clause should be quoted: 'to invite them (men) to let themselves be constantly recreated in this image, in an eschatological community, which is committed to man's struggle for liberation, unity, justice, peace and the fulness of life.'¹ Now this is unexceptionable as a social programme; but is it what salvation in the New Testament sense of the term is all about? Salvation in the New Testament is about eternal life, and about the penetration of time by the eternal in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word. It does not do to stress this aspect of salvation too much. There is a true otherworldliness which means inwardness and depth; there is a false otherworldliness which means withdrawal and evasion of responsibility. On the other hand, as Coleridge sapiently remarked a long time ago (I quote

¹ *Eschatologische Gemeinde* can be made to mean something in German; eschatological community is literally meaningless in English.

from memory), 'even terrestrial charts cannot be drawn without celestial observations.' A salvation which is conceived in purely three-dimensional terms ends by being no salvation at all. Perhaps the gravest weakness of this Assembly is that its title was wrongly chosen; there is hardly anything about salvation, in any New Testament sense of the term, in its papers and proceedings.

Evangelism and Mission

THIS leads on to the further question, In what sense was it an Assembly of a Commission on World Mission and Evangelism? What sense is to be attributed to the words *evangelism* and *mission*?

From about 1925 onwards it was impossible to use the old slogan, 'The Evangelisation of the World in this Generation,' largely because of the inability or unwillingness of the Germans to recognise the difference between evangelisation and conversion which is self-evident to every English-speaker. But the worldwide dimension was present in all serious missionary thinking, Catholic or Protestant, of that period. In 1933 I published an article, based on the Indian national census of 1931, in which I showed that at that time 95 million people in India were not merely not evangelised but not within any possible reach of any sound of the Gospel. People were still thinking in terms of universal evangelisation and the article attracted quite a lot of attention. This attitude persisted up till the Whitby Conference of 1947, the motto of which was 'Expectant Evangelism.'

At that conference for the first time the full spiritual equality of the 'younger churches' was taken as an axiom which no longer needed even to be debated. The challenge presented to the churches of the third world by their colleagues was as follows:

Will you tell us what plans you have developed for the total evangelisation of your countries within, say, the next thirty or fifty years? Can you expect to complete the task within that period unaided and from your own resources? If so, we shall happily withdraw. If you still feel that you need our help, will you let us know in what ways and to what extent?

It was immediately clear that among the leaders of those churches only the Koreans had been thinking in terms of total evangelisation; all the others had a more parochial and less expansive picture of the church. The challenge of Whitby has never been taken up, and its questions have never been answered. In India today those who are out of reach of any sound of the gospel number at least 200 million; so much worse off are we than we were in 1933.

Bangkok 1973, as far as I have been able to master its documents, failed to formulate any such questions, perhaps regarding them as obsolete; world evangelisation is mentioned occasionally but seems to

have played little part in the thinking of the Assembly. But the questions still need to be formulated and in terms relevant to the new age:

If we put the question in the form, Can an African tribal Church maintain itself as an African tribal Church without outside aid, the answer is certainly, Yes.

If we ask, Can the Kenyan Churches as they now are instruct and pastorally care for the thousands of people that they are baptising every year, the answer is emphatically No. As Fr. Adrian Hastings, an acute observer of the African scene, has warned us, we are in grave danger of reproducing in Africa the Latin American pattern of a vast mass of baptised heathenism, knowing little of Christianity except the name.

If we go on to ask whether the Kenyan Churches, as they now are, are prepared unaided to undertake the total evangelisation of the neighbouring country of Somalia, with a population of about three million, among whom the Christian percentage is about 0.01, it must be admitted that the Kenyan Churches have given no sign as yet of having even considered this possibility.

Recent discussions leave on the mind rather forcibly the impression that the concept of partnership in obedience has been abandoned, and that the Churches of the third world are claiming the right to dictate to the older churches what their obedience should be, rather than sitting down quietly with them to listen to the voice of God.

The Real Mistake

MY own view is that the capital mistake was made in 1963 when the World Council adopted as its own the meaningless slogan 'Mission in six continents'. The correct term would have been 'Witness in six continents', an expression which I have never myself hesitated to use. But, if everything is called mission, nothing is mission, and the resulting confusion is seen constantly in the documents before us. In the New Testament, two types of mission are recognised: the mission to Israel, and the mission to the Gentiles; in the one case mission to those who are within the covenant made by God with Moses, but not within the new covenant in Christ; in the other to those who are within the universal covenant of the one God with men, but not within either of the biblical covenants. It would be far better if we reverted to biblical theology; we should then avoid some of the many confusions into which we have fallen, and would no longer class as 'mission' those activities which should properly be classed as inter-church aid or church extension. Many of these activities belong properly to other departments or divisions of the World Council. If they were put where they belong, the Division of World Mission and Evangelism would be able to get on with its proper job, and would no longer be

compelled to overload its programme with subjects that really do not concern it.

The modern missionary movement and the modern ecumenical movement alike grew out of an intense reverence for *the Scriptures* as the Word of God, together with an intense desire for biblical renewal in obedience to the Word of God. The reader of the Bangkok documents receives very strongly the impression that the ecumenical movement is no longer biblically based.

Of course various speakers at intervals lift their caps and make a gesture of reverence in the direction of Holy Scripture. There are even a number of quotations from the text of the Bible. But the impression remains that these are brought in, in support of positions already reached on other grounds, rather than that they serve as the basis from which the argument starts and proceeds. If this is true, it follows that, to quote the famous Barmen declaration of the German Evangelical Churches in May 1934, the Council has recognised 'as sources for its proclamation, besides and apart from this sole Word of God, other events and powers, forms and truths as a revelation from God'. In that case, it is essential that someone with the authority and power of Karl Barth should now as in 1934 say to the Council, in the spirit of love and humility but at the same time without the smallest shadow of doubt, that 'Jesus Christ, as witness is borne to us concerning him in the Holy Scriptures, is the sole Word of God to which we must hearken, and which we must trust and obey, whether in life or in death'.

The Future

THE time is short. The next Assembly of the World Council of Churches is to take place in 1975, and a preparatory theological session in 1974. So far World Council Assemblies have followed the law of diminishing returns. Each has been of less value than the one which came before it, since the Council, deaf to all warnings, has followed the practice of producing endless hastily written reports on a great variety of subjects, none of which will ever again be read by anyone other than historians of the Church. It is greatly to be feared that 1975 will follow the pattern of 1954 and 1961 and 1968. If that Assembly is to say anything to which the Churches will pay attention, far deeper theological preparation is needed than is evident in the pages of *Bangkok Assembly 1973*.

But this affords no ground for Evangelicals to chortle in self-satisfaction, and to say, 'We deal in better things than these.' If I am anxious about the Assembly of 1975, I am far more anxious about the Lausanne Conference on Evangelism which is announced for 1974. I fear greatly lest this may be simply a pleasant gathering of old friends, the

pious affirmations of which, like those of the Berlin Conference, may cause less than a ripple on the surface of the life of the churches of Christ. Though the preparations for Bangkok were at many points lamentably inadequate and even childish, at least the ecumenists have recognised where the problems of 1973 lie, and have made some attempt, however unsuccessful, to deal with them. The churches are still asking, with increasing distress, the as yet unanswered question, 'When are Evangelicals going to begin to think?'

But this brief review of many things should not end on this somewhat anxious note. In the course of the votes of thanks at the end of the Bangkok Assembly, Miss Tribhuwan of India is reported as having spoken in the following terms:

Every year when the clock strikes twelve at noon on the fifth of January my mind and thoughts will travel back to this Happy Hall where I heard at the worship service voices from Africa, Asia, Europe and America; voices of black and white, of Catholic and Protestant, rising to the throne of grace—as one voice—'Out of the depths we cry unto thee Oh Lord.' I have found the basic unity and reconciliation here and as this united voice spreads far and wide covering the six continents we will find the wounds of suffering humanity being healed (p. 45).

There speaks an authentic Christian voice. This gives ground for hope that, though the negative aspects of Bangkok 1973 are by far the most evident, there may still have been a positive content which can be built into the future of the growing and developing church of Jesus Christ.

(Except where otherwise identified, all quotations are from the official report of the Assembly, *Bangkok Assembly 1973* World Council of Churches, Publications Office, Geneva, Switzerland.)