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The Nature of Salvation

STEPHEN NEILL

ANOTHER ASSEMBLY of the World Council of Churches is almost upon us. When the Council was in process of formation, its architects were warned that the Christian world could not possibly stand more than once in ten years an Assembly of the kind that was being planned. No attention was paid to the warning. Fortunately the original purpose of having an Assembly once every five years has never been carried into effect. I was myself successful in starting the movement which led to the postponement of the third assembly from 1960 to 1961. The pattern of one Assembly every seven years seems to have established itself. But even this is far too short an interval. It takes at least five years to prepare an Assembly that is to be really useful, and at least five years for the churches to absorb the results of an effective Assembly.

Nearly four years were allowed for the preparation of the Second Vatican Council. The Council held four long sessions. But it has become even clearer than it was at the time that the period allowed was wholly inadequate. Some of the documents presented to the Council were found to be so imperfect that they had to be almost wholly re-written. Of the many documents finally accepted only three, or at the most four, are of the kind that really make church history.

A glance backwards into the past shows how far we have fallen back, instead of going forward, in the art of preparing ecumenical meetings. The best ecumenical assembly ever held was the Oxford Conference of 1937 on Church, Community and State. That Conference had the wisdom to concentrate on one main theme. Stalin and Hitler had risen above the horizon. Totalitarianism was the main preoccupation of civilised states and churches alike, and it was to this theme that the Conference devoted the greater part of its attention. Preparations had been going on for a long time. Under the guidance of J. H. Oldham, who had a unique flair for seeing who were, and still more of seeing who were going to be, important in the affairs of the

church, no less than two hundred and fifty papers were written and widely discussed. Of these only about seventy were found worthy of inclusion in the six volumes which were published. Unfortunately these volumes are now something of a museum piece, the entire stock having been destroyed during the bombing of London. Anyone who has access to them will have the opportunity of a unique conspectus of serious Christian thinking as it was in the year of grace 1937. It was of this Conference that an unprejudiced observer Professor J. H. Nichols wrote: 'The authority of the Oxford Reports was unprecedented, at least in Protestant social ethics, and their competence enabled them to rank with the best of secular thought, a phenomenon scarcely seen since the seventeenth century.'

Preparations for Nairobi 1975 have been going on for some time in somewhat haphazard fashion. But it is only recently, that is less than a year before the date fixed for the convening of the Assembly, that I have been able to see the six small folders on which the Christian world as a whole is invited to base its preparation for a world Assembly.

A first glance at the material is not encouraging. The World Council has disregarded the advice to concentrate on one major theological theme, and to attempt to produce a report which could bear comparison with the principal documents of Vatican II. We are presented with documents relating to six different themes, each of considerable importance. Twelve teams of experts in different parts of the world ought to have been engaged in study of each of these themes over the last five years, in order to digest the immense amount of material which is already available or could have been made available on each of the themes, and to make their results accessible to the world in good time for careful consideration by those who will be present at the Assembly, and by others who are qualified to form opinions on the kind of subjects to be dealt with. As it is, it is to be feared that the pattern of former Assemblies will be repeated. Pre-packaged reports will be presented, with no adequate time for discussion by the Assembly as a whole; amendments will be hastily put forward and remitted to a drafting committee; minority opinions will not be recorded; and the reports accepted by the Assembly may be altered by an editorial committee in such a way as to make them mean something rather different from what was intended by the Assembly.

The quality of the material submitted is very uneven. Few of the documents qualify as serious statements based on careful theological consideration of the issues at stake. Some are of an unbelievable triviality. This is just the kind of material that we used to send out in preparation for a students' conference. We shall have to wait and see whether it justifies itself as adequate to serve as preparation for an Assembly of presumably adult church leaders.

First impressions are of a certain theological naïveté in the material submitted. What is the authority on which these various statements,

and especially the situation papers in which the organisers of the Assembly express their understanding of the situation are based? It was always taken for granted in ecumenical circles that Jesus Christ is our sole authority, that, as was solemnly stated by the Barmen declaration of 1934, he is that Word of God to which alone we have to hearken, whether in life or in death. It was further agreed that this Word is set forth in decisive form in the pages of the New Testament. Has this principle of authority been faithfully followed in these papers?

Jesus Christ is of course referred to. We are told in the paper for Section III, *Seeking Community* that 'we believe that, in the search for wider and deeper community, it is Jesus Christ who unites, and that this quest for community, for a world community of communities, has started in Him, and will be completed in Him'. This may be interpreted in a fully orthodox sense; but it would have been well, if it had been completed by the Lord's own words: 'You will be hated by all nations for my name's sake' (Matt. 24:9), and 'the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God' (John 16:2). The offence of the Cross is not conspicuously present in these documents.

At other points there seems to be present a euphoria strangely out of touch with the tragic world in which we live. One of the headings in the same document reads: 'Our neighbours everywhere are seeking community'. One almost has the feeling of reading a document written in the period of liberal optimism in the nineteenth century. Surely this statement is exactly contradicted by the realities of our situation. It is the fact that large sections of the human race have passionately repudiated community. Anyone who has lived in East Africa in recent years and shared the agonies of the Asian population is hardly likely to question this statement. The intensity of feeling which helps to promote the formation of a narrow community seems to combine itself all too naturally with hatred of those who are outside that community; old dreams have died; the majority of the inhabitants of the African continent seem to have repudiated the ideal of a multi-racial society.

The same statement tells us that Christians' desire for security and identity in existing power structures and in ghetto communities continues and this may be true, though it is hard to attach any precise meaning to an affirmation so vaguely and allusively phrased. It would have been, perhaps, better if it had been plainly stated that over about two-thirds of the land surface of the world Christians are an underprivileged community. For purely pragmatic reasons the Marxist in some countries has given up the direct persecution of Christians. But he has never made any secret of his determination to eliminate every form of religion, as an undesirable survival from the past and as a hindrance to the progress of the revolution. The Muslim feels himself no less threatened than the Christian. In some non-

Marxist countries, even those which have accepted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Christian is not allowed to feel himself a first-class citizen. Even in what is meant as a conciliatory document, there are advantages in sometimes calling a spade a spade.

Much attention will no doubt be paid by the Assembly to the question of salvation, and, following on the lines of the Bangkok Report, there may be an inclination to interpret the term 'salvation' almost exclusively in terms of political emancipation from alien rule, or from rule which is judged not to be in the best interests of the subject population.

Almost everyone will agree that liberation from alien and oppressive rule is a good thing. Not everyone remembers that the western powers are under solemn obligation to restore the liberty of Latvia, Lithuania and Esthonia, three small countries absorbed in the course of the second world war into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, without even the pretence that this was carried out in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants. Most Christians would agree in regarding as a matter of urgency the restoration to liberty of Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Eastern Germany, with the provision of such compensation as is possible for the outrages committed against the liberty both of individuals and nations. It is hard to see how in present circumstances such liberation is possible. But on a subject of such urgency it is hardly possible for a Christian Assembly to keep silence.

It may be taken as certain that much attention will be devoted to Latin America, an area in which hope and despair seem to march hand in hand.

Philip Agee's *CIA Diary* (1975) is a book which is certain to be widely discussed and refuted at every point at which refutation is possible. But, even though only ten percent of what is stated in the book proves in the end to be reliable, that in itself is quite enough to show up the astonishing folly and ineptitude of American interference in the internal affairs of Latin American States, allegedly in the interests of orderly government and of fending off the communist menace. Over vast areas the gap between the haves and the have-nots is as wide as it is anywhere in the world, not excluding India; but at every point the interests of the poor seem to have been sacrificed to the interests of the rich, and the nations which profess to be concerned for justice and liberty appear to have identified themselves with oppression and the defence of wrong.

It is not surprising that what is called the theology of liberation has in the main taken its origins from the Latin American situation. Many of the earlier utterances on this theme have been so confused and so lacking in theological substance as to have afforded little hold for serious consideration. At last we have a book, the *Theology of Liberation* by Fr. Gutiérrez (Eng. trans. 1973) which, whether one

agrees with it or not, does deserve serious and careful study. Fr. Gutiérrez accepts the general pattern of this school of thinkers—the Exodus of Israel from Egypt is taken as a paradigm of liberation, the oppressors being identified with the Egyptians and the oppressed with Israel. Some doubt exists as to the identity of the one who is to play the part of Moses. But Fr. Gutiérrez goes far beyond the limits of this narrow thesis in trying to understand theologically the political realities in the midst of which he has to live.

One thing which his book makes very clear is that the themes of violence and non-violence must be given far fuller and deeper consideration than has yet been devoted to them by ecumenical assemblies. Four main views are held in the Christian world:

1. There are those who regard violence as a natural and normal Christian activity in any situation of oppression.
2. At the opposite extreme are the peace-churches, which condemn violence in every form, and regard it as irreconcilable with any serious attempt to understand the Gospel of Christ.
3. There are those who, like the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, are prepared to condone violence, provided that it does not call itself violence, and affirms that its aims are essentially peaceful.
4. There are those who hold that violence is always evil, but that in certain circumstances it may be the lesser of two evils. I suppose I am only one of millions of Christians who, when Hitler marched into Prague in March 1939, decided that this man had to be stopped, whatever (and we really meant whatever) the cost.

It is unlikely that an ecumenical assembly will succeed in resolving all the doubts of Christians on this subject; the debate will continue. Even the position of members of the peace-churches does not seem to be perfectly logical, since the majority of them are not anarchists, do support the existence of police forces and admit the right of states to counter lawless violence with violence, if such a situation should occur. But the problem is one of such urgency, and has been rendered so much more acute by recent events and policies within the Christian world, that it must be regarded as almost the top priority for thorough exploration and definition at such an Assembly as Nairobi 1975.

We are all more influenced by mythology than we often dare to recognise. The Marxists have shown themselves past masters in the art of the dissemination of mythology under the guise of truth. One of the myths that has proved most widely acceptable is that of the sinless victim, the proletariat. All wickedness is on the side of the strong; the weak are blameless, endowed with all virtues, and waiting only for an opportunity to exercise them in freedom.

This would be very nice if it were true. The history of political liberation does not bear out the myth. If the tables are turned and the weak obtain political power, they tend to show themselves just as

full of wickedness as the former oppressors. Political independence was forced on the Sudan by a collusion of Russia and the United States at the United Nations, with little regard for the wishes of the people concerned. The result was a civil war which lasted for sixteen years and reduced vast areas of the Southern Sudan to desolation. All credit to the World Council for such share as it had in the termination of the war.

Independence in Rwanda and Burundi led to the flaring up of the age-long ill-will between the Hutu and the Tutsi, and to the resulting massacres in which it has been reckoned that a quarter of a million victims have died. The Republic of Chad has been almost ruined by a civil war, lasting over a number of years, in which the government of the partially Christianised south, aided by French troops, has been trying to reduce to subservience the mainly Muslim north. In Nigeria, after independence, the savage massacres of Ibos in the northern section of the country provoked a violent outburst of Ibo tribalism, with the resulting demand for an independent Biafra and the horrors of civil war.

It would be possible to extend the list almost indefinitely. Even more serious perhaps is the deep-rooted bitterness among young people in Africa over the failure of liberation to produce the justice and equality which had been promised and expected. This bitterness is directed not at the white man, who is today only a memory, but against the new rulers. Everyone who has worked among African students knows the intensity of their feelings towards the new rich; they are likely to say 'We did not get rid of the white millionaire in order to put power into the hands of the black millionaire who may be even worse than his predecessor'.

To recognise this is simply realism. We all need liberation, but what we need is liberation from sin. Such doctrine is of course highly unpopular, especially among those who have accepted a good dose of the Marxist mythology. The sins of the rich are not the same as the sins of the poor; the sins of the Christian may be different from those of the Hindu or the Buddhist. But the needs are essentially the same; and, unless we say so plainly, we are simply betraying the truth of the Gospel.

This leads us a further step in the analysis of the concept of liberation. We hear rather often the saying that humanisation must precede evangelisation, sometimes indeed that in the present day world humanisation is evangelisation. To this we may agree—on one condition. The primary factor in humanisation is the knowledge of God revealed in Jesus Christ. No man is fully human until he has come to know God and himself in the searchlight of Jesus Christ. If we suppose otherwise, we have not begun to understand what humanisation is. This is not theory. We have abundant evidence from eighty years of missionary work among the oppressed and downtrodden 'outcastes'

in India. The fact that I now have to put that word in inverted commas shows that we were right. The man whom God has accepted cannot be declared outcaste by man. It was when the Christian came and sat down with the one whom society had rejected, and told him that in Christ he had been accepted by God with an acceptance that no human decree or tradition could annul, that he began to become aware of his human dignity. In a most remarkable way the believer became an individual. Previously he might seem to have been so shaped and patterned by the conditions in which he was compelled to dwell as to be almost exchangeable with his brother; he belonged all too closely to the type. Once incorporated into Christ, he became in a new way a human being, with individuality and a sense of dignity, and a capacity to learn and understand with which he had never been credited before. And of course in the process he became discontented, and rightly, with the status which society had assigned to him and from which society offered him no escape.

The other horrible barbarism which liberation theology has inflicted upon us is 'conscientisation'. This is, in any case, intolerable in English, since the English for the French *conscience* is in many cases not *conscience* but *consciousness*. But one of hardships we have to endure is putting up with ecumenical English, and nothing is to be gained by arguing over words. What is meant by this strange word can perhaps best be simply stated as an awareness that things can be other than they are. It is true that with a certain level of human distress, of malnutrition, unemployment or under-employment, deprivation of the very elements of decent orderly living, hope, the last gift of the gods to men, flies away and escapes. There can grow up a patient, almost animal, endurance of the intolerable, a sense that as things have been, so they must always remain. Things will not change until men begin to believe that they can change. The 'outcaste' Christian saw them change before his very eyes, as he and his friends ceased to drink, began to work, cared more for their wives and children, realised that within the limits of an unjust system great changes could be brought about. Hope had returned. If similar changes did occur apart from the preaching and acceptance of the Christian Gospel, they were far less noticeable.

All this is history and not mythology. Of course too much must not be claimed for the Christian mission. There were other notable helpers of the depressed classes, best known among them Mahatma Gandhi, who claimed that these folk must be called Harijans, the children of God, and not known by the opprobrious terms that had previously been used of them; and Dr. Ambedkar, himself drawn from one of the excluded communities. Both these men thought in more political terms than would have been suitable for the foreign missionary. But I think it is true to say that they both climbed up on the backs of the missionaries and profited by what they had done. It was

a great day when the Parliament of independent India formally declared untouchability to be for the future illegal. It may be said, and not without reason, that acts of Parliament do not of themselves change situations, and that little in the villages has really changed. The Indian press provides evidence every day that this is so, and that an unjust system cannot be uprooted overnight. Yet progress has been considerable and the movement of the times is all in the right direction.

All that I have been trying to point out in this section is that the order of happenings in one situation which I know well was:

- direct evangelism with a view to conversion
- a notable recovery of human dignity
- social and economic improvement
- an awareness of possible change
- actual political achievement.

I am not prepared to say that equally good results could not have been attained by an alteration or inversion of the order of procedure. I am saying, and emphatically, that this is something which remains to be proved; and that direct preaching of the Gospel at every stage is something that the responsible Christian cannot neglect, or will neglect at his peril. The Nairobi Assembly will render a great service to the Christian world, if it will draw the whole liberation theology out of the cloudy phraseology and mythical trappings in which it is so often obscured, bring it clearly into the light of day, and document its achievements by carefully observed and recorded examples.

I conclude this brief study with a plea that the great phrase 'the whole Church bringing the whole Gospel to the whole world' should be restored to its proper place of honour in the thinking and in the expressions of the Assembly.

It has marked an improvement in our theology that we have come to see that the evangelistic entity must be the whole church and not any special section of it. The existence of missionary societies is in itself a confession of failure on the part of the church to be itself the church. Further, the recognition by thoughtful 'Evangelicals' that the social and international dimensions belong to the Gospel as of right, and are not alien excrescences brought in by irresponsible 'liberals', builds bridges over what appeared to be chasms, and has made conversation possible in a degree that would have been thought impossible even a few years ago. We all agree today that 'the world' is not a purely geographical expression. There is no autonomous realism in which the writ of Christ does not run. There are worlds such as those of economics and politics, which have tried to declare their own independence and to claim that Christ has no word to say to them. This is a blasphemy which the church cannot tolerate. How the law of Christ is to be made effective in these realms is a question for the expert. But the prophetic voice of the church must not be stilled.

But, when we have registered all these agreements, and expressed

our gratitude to God for them, we have to add that the geographical is a factor that will not permit itself to be excluded. It is still the fact that one third of the world's population has never so much as heard the name of Christ. It is true that many of these millions are in lands which today are inaccessible to any kind of Christian witness from outside. But this is not true of all.

It may be appropriate to draw attention to one or two elements in the situation which a Christian Assembly should not overlook: For the first time in history an accurate Christian survey of Africa has been drawn up, tribe by tribe. There is no reason why similar surveys should not be drawn up for other areas of the world. Why not discover where we really are in this epoch of the church's history?

It is plain, and the Roman Catholic expert Fr. Adrian Hastings has often drawn our attention to the fact, that the success of the church in Africa is its greatest danger. We continue to baptise thousands of Africans into the church every week, and we are in danger of reproducing the Latin American situation, since the provision for the teaching and training of new converts, and the development of an indigenous ministry, lag far behind the minimum demands of the situation.

It is clear that there are many areas as yet unreached by even the first pioneer preaching of the Gospel. Some of these are, no doubt, for political reasons inaccessible, even to Africans of other nations. To others the doors seem open. Shall we postpone the attempt to reach them to some mythological and at present unimaginable future? Or shall we agree that, in this area, the king's business requires haste, and repeat the words spoken by the Lord of hosts himself to the prophet Isaiah, 'Whom shall we send and who will go for us?'

I have drawn my illustrations from Africa, since that is the continent in which I have lived for the greater part of the past six years, and in which I am actually writing these words. Much could be added by those who have had more recent experience than I of other parts of the world. This aspect of the work and witness of the church does not seem to have received, in the preparatory documents of the Assembly, the attention which its importance demands.

Nairobi 1975 will be the fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Will it also be the last? It is often light-heartedly assumed that, because an ecumenical organ exists, it will go on existing for ever. But this is not the case. At one time the lead in ecumenical enterprise was taken by the World Alliance for Promoting International Friendship through the Churches. Many of my readers may never even have heard of that body, which came to an inglorious end in June 1948, just before the holding of the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches. That which has happened once could happen again.

Assemblies of the World Council have been marked by the law of diminishing returns. Amsterdam 1948 was exciting just because it was the first, and it did manage to produce a message to the churches which

was and still is memorable. Evanston 1954 was a kind of vocal pause. New Delhi 1961 was marked by the integration of World Council and International Missionary Council, and by the admission of Russia and other Orthodox Churches to membership. Uppsala 1968 did nothing significant except to produce a number of hastily compiled reports, which no one will ever read except church historians. All advice to hold assemblies less frequently and with far better preparation, all proposals radically to change the character of assemblies to make them more effective as expressions of the mind of the church, have been disregarded. What will Nairobi 1975 do? The prospects cannot be viewed without a measure of foreboding. Unless the Holy Spirit is very notably at work during the period which remains for preparation, and in the proceedings of the Assembly itself, Nairobi 1975 might well be the last as well as the fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches.