

# Editorial

## Melbourne and Pattaya

The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) conference in Melbourne, and the Lausanne follow-up Consultation on World Evangelization in Pattaya, make it possible that 1980 will be an important year in developing Christian thinking about mission and evangelism. In this issue we are therefore carrying an article which looks back to the great Edinburgh conference of 1910, and another attempting to spell out some of the concerns which our contributor (Andrew Kirk) feels should dominate Melbourne and Pattaya.

The CWME theme—'Your Kingdom Come'—ensures that this conference will carry forward the debate within ecumenical circles in the most crucial of areas. When the theme surfaced at the Life and Work conference in Stockholm in 1925, it revealed the depth of division that existed, particularly between Lutherans and other Protestants. The debate centred around the legitimacy of attempting to establish God's kingdom on earth, and this debate of course continues. If the kingdom is, in some sense, 'not yet' and not until Christ's final coming, this has implications of great moment for the understanding of the Christian task.

The Melbourne conference will be important, not only for its reports and conclusions and the stimulus it may provide, but also because of what it may reveal about official Protestant ecumenism. The World Council of Churches (WCC) has manifestly been undergoing a transformation within the last decade, and Bishop Lesslie Newbigin offers a succinct analysis of the process. He sees the period between 1948 and the early sixties as that of the 'old establishment (white, western, "developed")', with the rest of the world 'on the margins'. The fourth assembly at Uppsala (1968) marked a notable shift in the axis of power. 'The rest of the world (black, young poor) forced itself, often stridently, into the consciousness of the Assembly.' At Nairobi (1975) he detected that the pendulum had swung back to a more median position 'in which no one part of the world could impose the agenda upon the rest.' As far as Newbigin was concerned, this meant that Nairobi was 'the best of the five Assemblies' which he had attended (*'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites': Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Nairobi, 1975*, Report by the Church of England Delegates, GS285, London n.d., p 17). This assessment is attractive, though it should be said that Uppsala seemed to represent the impact of the radical idealism of the anti-Vietnam war movement and the current upsurge of youthful dreams on western church leaders, as much as the emergence of

third world dominance. The assembly witnessed the union of these forces to produce an altogether more radically political movement.

The CWME development closely resembles that of its parent body. The Bangkok conference (1973) revealed many of the same trends as Uppsala. There was a strident determination to define salvation in this-worldly terms which now looks, with the hindsight of seven years, naive and idealistic. Bishop John Taylor has drawn attention to its selectivity 'in its expression of political indignation', which appears 'embarrassing in the present context of mass extermination in Cambodia, and amidst the ambiguities of the Angolan liberation' ('Bangkok: 1972-1973', *International Review of Mission*, vol. 67, no. 267, July 1978, p 368). The problem is, of course, not only the one-sidedness of the indignation, but the apparent limitation of Bangkok's understanding of salvation to political and sociological terms. Indeed Bishop Stephen Neill concluded that there was 'hardly anything about salvation, in the New Testament sense of the term, in its papers and proceedings.' ('Salvation Today?', *Churchman*, vol. 87:4, 1973, p 271)

The deliberations of the conference were not helped by the fact that its balance was heavily weighted towards professional church representatives. Seventy per cent of the delegates were either church officials or WCC/CWME staff (R. Winter, ed., *The Evangelical Response to Bangkok*, William Carey Library: Pasadena 1973, p 101). It was felt by many that there were insufficient theologians and certainly too few representatives of local congregations. It left the conference very open to the charge that its radicalism was that of a professional élite and consequently bore little relation to the opinions of the typical church member.

If Bangkok seems to be, in many of its statements, a late expression of a political utopianism more typical of the sixties than the seventies, it is perhaps legitimate to hope that Melbourne will be characterized more by realism, particularly biblical realism. That is not to suggest that it should disregard the social and political implications of the gospel, nor to argue that these should cease to be radical and uncomfortable. The hope is not that the horizontal disappears, but rather that it is held in better balance with the vertical. If this were to happen, it should mean that there would be a more obvious commitment to personal evangelism. It should mean, too, that there would be a greater realism in tackling social and political problems. There has been a heady rhetorical idealism about so many recent WCC statements. They seem to take little account of practical difficulties or of the continuation of human sinfulness, even when conditions and institutions have been altered. Thus they have 'an emphasis strangely out of touch with the tragic world in which we live.' (S. Neill, 'The Nature of Salvation', *Churchman*, vol. 89:3, 1975, p 227)

While the hope for Melbourne is therefore a re-emphasis on the

vertical, the fear for Pattaya is that the horizontal may be undermined. The reassertion of the conviction that the gospel has a social dimension has been one of the most interesting developments within evangelicalism during the last fifteen years. There is some evidence of a backlash against this understanding, of an attempt to argue that social and political radicalism are incompatible with evangelical belief. It is surely important that Pattaya resists any proposal to go back on the advances made at Lausanne in understanding the relevance of the gospel to the whole man.

It is important, finally, that hopes for either conference are not articulated merely as a preparatory manoeuvre to the expression of dissatisfaction if and when they are not precisely realized. Firstly, of course, our prayers are not always answered in exactly the way we expect, and we must always be open to God's plans and time-table. Secondly, it is in fact quite difficult to appreciate what those from very different cultural and theological traditions are actually saying. It is significant that a Latin American evangelical theologian such as Orlando Costas is altogether less pessimistic about Bangkok than most western evangelicals have been. He detects in its statements 'a step towards wholeness in mission' (O. E. Costas, *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*, Tyndale Press: Wheaton 1974, p 300). Thirdly, just because of the theological and cultural pluralism that is part of the nature of the WCC, realism must face the likelihood that the ideals, particularly of western evangelicals, will not be entirely fulfilled. It is right, therefore, to look forward to these conferences with hope, with an openness to the possibility of new perspectives, and with an optimism that is biblical rather than utopian.

## **Archbishops of Canterbury**

The retirement of Dr Coggan has given the opportunity for a number of instant assessments of his primacy. It is not the intention of this editorial to add substantially to these. It says much that he leaves his onerous office with the Church of England in a more healthy and optimistic state than it was five years ago. If it is true that he has been 'both splendidly clear and counter-productively over-simple; both attractively personal and alarmingly naive' (*Crockfords Clerical Directory, 1977-79*, OUP : London 1979, p ix), it is, as much as anything else, an illustration of the hazards of his office. The Archbishop is expected to communicate with a nation which has little church loyalty and less theological knowledge, and which often looks to the headlines for its opinions. He presides, at the same time, over a church of great theological diversity and relates to other churches, representing even greater diversity, and, in this presiding role is required to pay heed to the fine print and the carefully balanced

nuances of complex statements. He must be both a prophet and a diplomat. That Dr Coggan has succeeded in combining approachability and dignity, relevance and spirituality, deep Christian convictions and real Christian love, is no small achievement and one for which I am sure readers of *Churchman* are very grateful.

Dr Runcie succeeds him at a time when the West seems to be crying out for leadership. The disillusionments of the past decade and the frightening uncertainties of the decades to come, combine to ensure that there is a spiritual dimension to this cry. The media interest in Dr Runcie surely betokens more than journalistic curiosity. On, of course, an altogether greater scale, the secular fascination with Pope John Paul II is an example of the same phenomenon. It is part of the pope's attraction that he combines humanity and spirituality, and he conveys a sense of having lived amidst the realities of this world without having surrendered in any way his commitment to his understanding of the gospel: indeed quite the contrary. Dr Runcie is faced with the task of helping the church to translate, in a way that is meaningful and that does justice both to the gospel and to the dilemmas of contemporary man, the certainties of the gospel to the uncertainties of the modern world. All those connected with *Churchman* want to wish him God's blessing in this awesome task, and to assure him of their prayerful support.

### **The Report on Homosexuality**

In our last edition we promised that an article dealing with this Report would appear in the present issue. We are sorry that this has been delayed and will now be published later in the year.

PETER WILLIAMS