

Jesus: Cosmic Christ or a Man of History?

(A paper written from the Biblical angle)

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The concept of Cosmic Christ is associated with creation and the creation activity of God. At the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1961), much emphasis was laid upon the cosmic dimension of the work of Christ. The papers presented at the Assembly call us to consider the cosmic nature of the activity of Christ and thereby lay foundations for a fruitful dialogue with men of other faiths¹. This has especially been emphasized in the articles published in *Indian Voices in Today's Theological Debate*². This call to appreciate the cosmic aspect of Christ and his work liberates the church from its narrow, spiritualistic, individual salvation and church-oriented understanding of the work of Christ³. D. T. Niles has often called attention to the Christ who is already there in the secular world and its situations, beckoning the church and individual Christians to follow him and do what he is already doing there.

Our title seems to imply that Jesus is either the Cosmic Christ or a man of history. This either-or approach is altogether un-Indian. Roth observes:

'The Indian mind... has a tendency toward synthesis, not analysis, toward perceiving as a whole, not to probing into components'.⁴

Harrison also points out that throughout the centuries Hindu thought has been concerned with harmonizing the opposites and sums up its motto as 'Both-And'.⁵ The New Testament affirms both the cosmic Christ and the man of history.

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¹ Cf. papers by P. D. Devanandan, 'Called to Witness', and J. Sittler, 'Called to Unity', in *The Ecumenical Review*, XIV (1962), pp. 154-163 and 177-178.

² *Indian Voices in Today's Theological Debate*, edited by H. Bürkle and W. M. W. Roth, Lucknow, 1972.

³ P. V. Premasagar, 'Crisis for Salvation Theology', *IRM*, Vol. LXI (1972) pp. 62-66.

⁴ W. M. W. Roth, 'Thought Patterns: Fetters or Opportunities?', *Theological Debate*, *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵ M. H. Harrison, 'The Place of Old Testament Studies in Indian Theological Education' *IJT* (1956), p. 6.

Westermann observes that there are two ways in which the salvation activity of God is represented in the Bible: the blessing activity of creation and deliverance activity in history. These two aspects together form the unending salvation activity of God in the world in relation to his people. Deliverance is periodically experienced in the acts of God in history, whereas blessing is the continual creation activity of God in effecting growth and maturity, prosperity and success, increase and decrease, and in taking root and spreading. Deliverance is connected with momentary events and crises, whilst blessing-creation activity provides continuity between the momentary events and weaves them into a continuous history of salvation⁶. Westermann draws attention to the fact that although these two concepts exist side by side, there is an important distinction in the manner in which they are presented. Faith is connected with the deliverance acts of God in history, but the term 'believe' never occurs in connection with the speech of the creator or with creation. Therefore, according to Westermann, it is not possible to speak of creation faith in the Old Testament⁷. The creation activity of God in effecting growth, increase and preservation continue whether one makes a credal confession of God or not. Creation is the benevolent act of God which does not become ineffective even with the fall of man. The creation blessings continue whether man makes a credal confession of them or not. The creation concept is also associated with Wisdom in Israel, in that wisdom is found in other nations as well and Israel was willing to use the wisdom writings of other peoples in their own literature. The ancient little creed in Deut. 26: 5-8, has no reference to the creation story as all. It was the Yahwist who first prefaced the history of salvation with creation and primeval history⁸.

Westermann makes a further observation that healing is connected with the creation power of God and as such does not need a credal confession. Healing is the benevolent gift of God to all his creation including animals and plants. This could perhaps be discerned in the fact that Hindus claim that they have been healed by Venkateswara and other deities. Naaman requests that he be forgiven if he should bow down to Rimmon in the company of his king, and Elisha replies 'Go in peace', perhaps implying that healing does not after all need a credal confession. God offers to all men everywhere the mercies of healing whether they confess him or not. In the Gospels and the Acts the healing miracles are not conditioned by a credal confession of Jesus as Lord. On the other hand, the saving activity is connected with credal confession: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, you and your family' (Acts 16:31). The creative powers and the cosmic rule of God are not matters of confession but are gratefully acknowledged and praised. This could be seen very clearly in the Book of Psalms where the deliverance acts of God in history are thank-

⁶ C. Westermann, *Der Sagen in den Bibel und in Hemdeln der Kirche*, München 1968, pp. 11-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-21.

⁸ G. Von Rad, 'The form critical problems of the Hexateuch', *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, Edinburgh 1966, pp. 53ff.

fully confessed, while the creation acts of God are glorified in hymns of praise. The concept of the Cosmic Christ provides a basis for co-operation with men of other faiths or no faith, to work for the blessings offered to man in creation. These include areas of social, economic and political action and also that of healing. As the Cosmic Christ concept does not demand credal confession it makes room for all to join together in such enterprises. It is interesting to note that movements like that of Subba Rao of Munipalle have the healing ministry as their main mission, which does not demand a credal confession. However, the concept of the Cosmic Christ, lofty as it may appear, is in danger of reducing the work of Christ into natural processes without a call to urgent personal commitment and action.

Jesus as a man of history is related to confession and action. Incarnation is the rejection of privilege, and the coming to meet man as man. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus have opened a new possibility for man. Jesus lived this life, challenged its wrongs and laid down his life in the attempt to change the *status quo*. His parables reversed the social order, his dealings with people upset the accepted patterns of behaviour. He challenged the *status quo* in religion and society. There is no indication of his open attack on the political system of his day, but the fact that at least one of his disciples was a zealot may perhaps point to his concern in this regard. The life and work of Jesus is one of challenging and upsetting the then existing systems and as a result he became a victim of the evil in man¹⁰. In this struggle Jesus called men and women to be his followers in ushering in the kingdom of God, the supreme rule¹¹, where there would be justice, peace and prosperity for all men.

Jesus is a man of history, not in terms of the old discussion about the quest for the historical Jesus, but as one who challenged the *status quo* and influenced history by becoming the victim of the evil in man and thereby influencing and challenging many to follow this path. The title 'son of man' used by Jesus, in preference to the titles 'messiah' and 'the son of God', emphasises the fact that Jesus was aligning himself with oppressed people with a view to changing the oppressors so that they share the goods of this world with the poor. Zacchaeus decides to give to the poor; Jesus himself asks the rich young ruler to sell all that he had and give to the poor. The Magnificat (Luke 1:52-3) refers to this revolutionary mission of Jesus, and similarly the Nazareth manifesto (Luke 4:18) underlined the dynamic nature of the work of Jesus in bringing about revolutionary changes in the world.

Jesus as a man of history shows man his place in God's plan of the salvation of the world. Men and women are called to be co-workers with God in bringing about the new age. It is interesting to note that in the narrative of the call of Moses, God says:

⁹ G. Westermann, *Der Sagen*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁰ J. Moltmann's paper quoted by B. N. Y. Vaughan, *The Expectations of the Poor*, pp. 144-145.

¹¹ 'God' used as superlative in Hebrew; cf. G. Von Rad, *Genesis*, translation of Genesis 1, 2, *Ruach Adonai*, as 'mighty wind'.

I have *seen* the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, I have *heard* their cry because of their taskmasters, I *knew* their sufferings and I have *come down to deliver* them out of the land of the Egyptians and to *bring them up* out of the land. . . ' (Ex. 3: 7-10).

Having seen, heard and known, God comes down and yet calls Moses to go and to speak to Pharaoh. Jesus, having come, appoints the twelve, to be with him, and to send them out. The fact that Jesus himself did not initiate a revolution does not rule out the possibility of preparing his disciples for a revolution. The disciples challenge the authorities in Jerusalem and say that they would rather obey God than man.

The name 'Jesus' has historical associations with victory and possession of the land of Canaan. The judges, as men who liberated the people from foreign oppressors and offered periods of peace and prosperity, are called 'Saviours'. Jesus sought to liberate men and women from all forms of oppression and sin and turn them into agents of change and new life. Jesus refused the title 'king', representing the *status quo*, and accepted the dynamic revolutionary role of the servant; the servant who dared to risk his life in fulfilling God's plan of salvation for man. He endured vicarious suffering in bringing about liberation and new life for all men. Mary the Mother of Jesus refers to herself as *hē doulē Kyriou* (Luke 1:38), indicating perhaps her own vicarious suffering in accepting the role of the mother of Jesus. This was servanthood, not in the sense of passive, docile, slavish mentality, but of active acceptance and willingness to cooperate with God's plan of salvation and bearing the suffering involved in it. There is a call to men and women to accept the challenge and to commit themselves to the mission of Jesus.

Jesus as cosmic Christ deserves our adoration and praise, but as a man of history offers a dynamic vision with a call to discipleship, action and cooperation with God in working for a new world.