

From Consensus To Controversy: Christian Literature on Social Questions in India in the last Twenty-Five years

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The 1950s were a period of blooming through publication of several Christian groups concerned with social questions which had their earlier roots in the Kerala Youth Christian Council of Action,¹ the Student Christian Movement and the publishing department of the Young Men's Christian Association and which were stimulated by international ecumenical organizations with the encouragement of the National Christian Council of India. Primary among these groups were the Christian Institute for the Study of Society, the Committee for Literature on Social Concerns and the Bombay Conference Follow-up Study on Rapid Social Change in India—all of which merged into the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society upon its organization in 1957.² The pre-eminent social thinker of the movement comprised by these groups was M. M. Thomas. He was also the paramount encourager and enabler of all others in the movement who engaged in social thought. In this he was himself encouraged and supported by P. D. Devanandan and some others. I venture that it is almost impossible to overestimate the crucial importance of this encouragement, enablement and support to this blooming of Christian literature on social questions.

Throughout the 1950s, and for a few years more, the positions of most of the members of this movement fitted into a common consensus and the majority of their publications were collectively written books and consultation reports—even when they agreed to disagree.

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¹ Cf. George M. John, *Youth Christian Council of Action: 1938-1954*, Madras: Christian Literature Society for Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1972.

² The complete bibliography of all of these organizations is *List of Publications on Religion and Society 1953-1974*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1975. This publication, edited by Jean Paranjoti-Augustine and Richard W. Taylor, is presently the most important bibliographic tool on the topic of this paper—in spite of the very large number of minor inaccuracies it contains.

*Revolution and Reconstruction*³ is typical of such books. Often an outline for a book would come out of a consultation; individuals would be invited to write draft chapters; then they would meet together in an extended 'writing party' to hear and criticize each other's drafts; chapters would be rewritten and consigned to a common editor—to be published as a group work. Bengt R. Hoffman⁴ has summarized the publications of this period very well. And *Christian Participation in Nation Building*⁵ is the best summary of the published thought of this movement from this period.

During the 1960s and the early 1970s consensus in Indian Christian literature on social, economic and political questions rapidly diminished. This was dramatized for me in 1973 when I tried to help Rajendra K. Sail, of the CISRS staff, analyse an exhaustive collection of post-1960 Christian writing on social questions that he had ably brought together as a basis for a planned teaching volume on Christian social thought like *Nation Building* had been for the previous decade. From careful working through of this material it became clear that there was no longer any consensus in social analysis; nor in economic analysis; nor in political analysis. A single consensual volume, even one with great simplification, had become wholly impossible. This same trend may be seen in the periodic CISRS books on the political situation in India. Through 1967⁶ these had been group works; but by 1971⁷ the volume had to be a collection of individual contributions.

By 1975-76 disagreement with fellowship and incivility continued in part. But in part it had given way to polemics; and not without some acrimony. M. M. Thomas has been reduced to writing on social questions only in a private cyclostyled newsletter. But his position is attacked in print by other members of the former common movement. And the National Council of YMCAs in India has summarily withdrawn from membership in the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society. I am inclined to guess that polarization may increase.

Twenty-five years ago Christian literature on social questions in India was pretty well dominated by foreign missionary authors. But then so was all theological literature in India. For instance, not a single one of the first twenty and more volumes of "The Christian Students' Library"⁸ had Indian authorship; and Indian contributors to

³ By H. F. J. Daniel and others, Bangalore: The Federal Council of the SCMs of India, Pakistan and Ceylon, 1957.

⁴ In his *Christian Social Thought in India: 1947-1962*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1967.

⁵ Compiled by M. M. Thomas, Bangalore: CISRS, 1960.

⁶ Herbert Jai Singh and Mark Sunder Rao (eds.), *Indian Politics After Nehru*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1967.

⁷ Saral K. Chatterji (ed.), *Political Prospects in India*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1971.

⁸ Published in Madras by CLS for the Senate of Serampore College.

the *IJT* were few in those years. The last missionary Principal of Serampore College, who was chairman of the overseers of 'The Christian Students' Library' and of *The Indian Journal of Theology*, failed to take action to change this deplorable situation. But in the area of writing on social questions this situation was quickly turned around by the bold new policies of P. D. Devanandan and M. M. Thomas as they took up the leadership of the organizations which coalesced into the CISRS movement. They intentionally shifted the balance of national origin of the authors of their publications so that it became predominantly Indian. This shifted, I trow, the whole tone and meaning of the literature. I think that a similar shift in the nationality of authorship of Catholic literature on social questions has recently begun—and find this hopeful.

I by no means want to suggest that missionary-authored literature was wholly unsatisfactory. Some of it was excellent. The contributions of Leonard M. Schiff⁹ and Roland W. Scott,¹⁰ who often worked in collaboration with their Indian colleagues in the Christian Institute for the Study of Society, were, I fancy, considerable.

Probably churches in most parts of the world and in most times in history have tended to be pro-establishment on social questions. But not infrequently, at the same time, some Christians may raise rather prophetic questions of the establishment. Something very like this was happening in India before Independence. It is commonly said that there were very few Christians active in the Indian Independence movement. And I suppose that it is fair to say this because the churches certainly did tend to be pro-establishment. Nevertheless it seems also true, albeit unnoticed, that the core Gandhian group around Sevagram included a disproportionately large number of non-Catholic Christians.¹¹

During the past quarter-century Christian literature on social questions in India has, I submit, continued to be, by and large, pro-establishment. This is by no means to suggest that Christian literature has been reactionary. The establishment line has, in my opinion, been far from reactionary. It was first liberal (or, more nearly, early English socialist) and then became, in some sense, socialist. And it is this liberal to socialist pro-establishment line that I want to suggest

⁹ L. M. Schiff, *The Christian in Society* (The Christian Students' Library No. 21), Madras: CLS for The Senate of Serampore College, 1960. Mr. Schiff was one of the editors of the *Bulletin of the CISS* (which later became *Religion and Society*), Vols. II and III (1955 and 1956).

¹⁰ Roland W. Scott, *Social Ethics in Modern Hinduism*, Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, 1953. P. D. Devanandan and R. W. Scott, *The Secular State in India*, Calcutta: YMCA Publishing House, n.d. (ca. 1953). R. W. Scott, *Thou Shalt Love* (published along with V. M. Chacko. *Christian Social Thought*), Bangalore: CISS, 1953.

¹¹ I think of J. C. Kumarappa, Bharatan Kumarappa, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the Aryanayakums and S. K. George. Curiously, I know of no Catholics.

was followed, in the main, by Christian literature. First came the liberal line of Jawaharlal Nehru which might best be called socialist humanism.¹² And the Bombay Conference follow-up studies tended to take this line. Then it became fashionable to be critical of failures to reach Nehru's goals and I find some of this fashion in *The Guardian*¹³ after the CISRS took over editorial responsibilities for it in August, 1964. While the Constitution was seen as the bulwark of Indian democracy, Christian writers tended to see it this way too. But when many of the elite started to question its utter adequacy, so did Christian writers.¹⁴ When the Indian intellectual establishment looked largely to the West, so did the Christian members of it; in so far as there was then a turning to the East, it seems to have been followed by many of the Christians interested in social questions too. Most recently a vast majority of Christians have favoured the Emergency.

Be that as it may, during this period some Christians have sometimes taken radical positions outside the stream of fashion. There has been advocacy of radical change as against the *status-quoism* of the churches.¹⁵ Some of the thinkers related to the Urban Industrial Mission Movement have moved a very long way indeed. They started with personal potential and group relational movements such as sensitivity training which tends to accept the social *status-quo* and help people to be happier within it—thus ideologically begging basic socio-political questions—and such as transactional analysis which also tends to do this and to trivialize interpersonal reality as well. From this really reactionary base some in this movement have moved on to methods of motivating and enabling small groups for really radical social change.¹⁶

My search for Catholic literature on social questions has turned up very little of truly Indian interest prior to the reports to and from the *All India Seminar on the Church in India Today*¹⁷ which includes workmanlike but unexciting sections on Socio-Economic Activities and on Civic and Political Life. I have the impression that the real breakthroughs of the All India Seminar were in the areas of indigenization and of dialogue and that these tended to screen what might otherwise have been a deal of social interest and concern—perhaps this screening

¹² Cf. M. M. Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1976, Chapter II.

¹³ *The Guardian*, 'A Christian Weekly Journal of Public Affairs' founded in 1851, continued to be published from Madras during the period of CISRS editorial stewardship—which ended in June, 1976.

¹⁴ Some examples of this may be found in J. R. Chandran (introd.), *The Secular Witness of E. V. Mathew*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1972, pp. 188 ff.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 209 ff. Cf. also Frank Thakurdas and Nawaz Dawood, *Issues in the Struggle for Justice*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1975.

¹⁶ Cf. M. J. Joseph (ed.) *P.O.—Towards Strategy for People's Organization in India*, Nagpur: Christian Service Agency, 1974.

¹⁷ New Delhi: CBCI Centre, 1969. The Synod of the Church of South India sponsored a Seminar which led to their publication of *Church and Social Justice*, Bangalore, 1975.

continues to take place to some extent. For instance, I find to my dismay that most Catholic ashrams are far more interested in liturgical questions than in social questions—and far more interested in dialogue about interiority than in dialogue about common social problems. *Social Action*¹⁸ has always had good social reportage—but not much India-oriented concern with Indian social questions. From the period prior to the All India Seminar an article on 'Morality of Hunger Strike'¹⁹ seems distressingly typical of Catholic publication in India. While claiming to deal with Gandhian and post-Gandhian situations it cites a 1927 article of a French Jesuit and a 1933 article of a New York Jesuit in a petty style of casuistry that is wholly trivializing, recalling all of the negative meanings of the unfortunate term 'jesuitical'. But in the same journal in the same year I find the fairly prophetic 'The Church in Kerala and the Crisis of Our Times.'²⁰

From 1973 Catholic literature starts to bloom, although much of it is by foreign missionaries. Most of the best of it is based on, or much influenced by, the Indian Social Institute Training Centre, Bangalore.²¹ Most of the authors were also influenced by the Asian Seminar on Religion and Development.²² The most important input for this Seminar came from François Houtart of Louvain as had the most important social input at the earlier All India Seminar and as did the input for the Seminar sponsored by the Synod of the Church of South India.²³ It is difficult to overestimate Canon Houtart's influence on literature on and engagement with social concerns after his masterful performances at these three seminars and his continuing visits to India for speaking and research. I hope that at least some of the Indian research directed by him and his associate Genevieve Lemerclinier will be published very soon. In 1974 Clement Godwin did a crucial Indian article following up, in a way, Houtart's presentation at the Asian Seminar on Religion and Development.²⁴ The next month Stasi Lourdasamy published on the oppression and liberation of the Ho tribal people.²⁵ Then the very next month Samuel Rayan, whom I consider the ablest Indian Catholic now doing constructive theology, published the sound and bold 'Christian Participation in the

¹⁸ Published by the Jesuit-run Indian Social Institute, New Delhi.

¹⁹ By G. Lobo in *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 9 (October 1964).

²⁰ By S. Kappen in *The Clergy Monthly Supplement* to Vol. XXVIII, No. 8 (being Vol. 7, No. 3, September 1964).

²¹ For instance, H. Volken, 'Social Justice and Community Development' in *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1 (January 1973).

²² The whole of *Word and Worship*, Vol. VI, No. 8 (October-November 1973) is the report of this Seminar.

²³ Cf. footnote 17, *supra*.

²⁴ 'The Role and Function of the Christian Religion in Indian Society' in *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 5 (May-June 1974).

²⁵ 'Evangelization and Socio-Cultural Factors' in *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 6 (July 1974).

Struggle for Social Justice: Some Theological Reflections.²⁶ The following month, from the hand of Robert Currie, one of the most deeply socially engaged younger theologians in India,²⁷ came 'Chai-basa Church: Traditional Role or Credible Sign of Salvation-Liberation.'²⁸ Currie starts with a dialogue with the article of Godwin; he deals, like Lourdasamy, with the actual situation of the Ho tribal people; his theology does not differ importantly from that of Rayan and is probably influenced by it; his style of analysis is much influenced by Houtart. Currie writes of the particular peoples' organization movement of which he was the trusted enabler. It was one of the most successful of such Church-related movements in India.²⁹ He deals excellently, after the manner of engaged sociology and committed theology, with the movement and with the Church's rather ideological negative response to it. Many found this an eye-opening article.

Only a few months later a very senior and officially important Bihar Jesuit published a wholly outrageous personal, sociological and theological attack on Fr Currie's article.³⁰ Currie is a Jesuit and was then in Bihar and the authors of most of the articles mentioned in the last paragraph are also Jesuits. This article strikes me as a petty self-serving attack by the longtime principal of a Church-related institution of which Currie had been critical. As it happens I have been engaged in directing research in Ranchi, where the institution in question is, during the last ten months, and unsolicited information I have got in this connection about this principal and his tenure leads me to conclude that Fr Currie's criticism is much milder, more charitable and less wide-ranging than could easily have been justified. Be that as it may, the sociological attack on Currie cites Prof. M. N. Srinivas and is, in my opinion, based on a gross misunderstanding of Srinivas—and it even locates Prof. Srinivas in the wrong city and in the wrong part of India. The theological attack on Currie seems to me to be equally incredible.

After this attack on Fr Currie by a highly placed fellow-Jesuit, Currie was summarily removed from India by the Jesuit hierarchy—probably more for his work than for his publication. But these two things are very closely linked when it comes to meaningful Christian writing on social questions and I am inclined to fear that this massive disciplining of Fr Currie may be taken as a signal of the foreclosure of free and open dialogue in the writing of Jesuits and some others on social questions in India. If it is so taken then I venture that it may

²⁶ In *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 7 (August 1974).

²⁷ Cf. Currie's contribution to *P.O.*, *op. cit.*

²⁸ In *The Clergy Monthly*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 8 (September 1974).

²⁹ Cf. my review of *P.O.* in *The National Christian Council Review*, Vol. LII (1974), p. 288.

³⁰ W. Proost, 'A Revolutionary in a Hurry' in *Vidyajyoti* (formerly *The Clergy Monthly*), Vol. XXIX No. 2 (February 1975).

be one of the biggest blunders of the Society of Jesus in India in this century—or perhaps even the biggest since they botched the evangelization of the Court of the Grand Mogul.

*The Rally*³¹ has contained some excellent social and economic analysis over the past few years; as well as some excellent consultation reports and resolutions from AICUF study seminars.³² Some recent numbers of *Jeevadhara*³³ on social themes have contained excellent material—like the number on 'Values in Crisis'³⁴ with fine articles by Kappen, Houtart, Lemercinier, K. Matthew Kurian and others, and the number on 'Theory and Praxis'³⁵ with good articles by Mathew Kanjirathinkal, Houtart and Lemercinier and others; but some numbers with promising themes like 'Youth in Revolt' and 'Man's Economic Liberation in the Light of the Bible' have failed to come to grips with Indian social reality. A most promising new series of publications on social questions from the Catholic side has begun from the Centre for Social Action,³⁶ They project nineteen titles by the middle of 1977—of which two are already in print. The majority of the booklets of about fifty pages each will deal with parts of the general theme 'India's Search for Development and Social Justice.' They are study books aimed toward study and reflection. It is already clear that some will be much better than others. *The Indian Situation*,³⁷ which is the second in the series, seems just excellent. I find it heartening that this series should be started when some periodicals have decided that it is no longer possible to publish the kind of material on social questions which they once did.

Shifting once more to the non-Catholic publications—with regret that this division between Catholic and non-Catholic publications in India is still so very real—most of the articles on social questions from this journal are well summarized by Dr Clark in his contribution to this anniversary number but I would like to mention B. F. Price's 'The Rule of Law'³⁸ and P. D. Devanandan's 'Man in Society according to Neo-Hinduism in the Light of the Christian Faith'³⁹ both of which contain good stuff. And the section on 'The Indian Situation' in the article 'Responsible Society',⁴⁰ which is the partial findings of the Indian Ecumenical Study Conference, Nagpur, 1952, contains a

³¹ A monthly published from Madras by the All India Catholic University Federation.

³² For instance, 'The Dynamism of Human Society' in *The Rally*, Vol. 51, No. 8 (1975). *Aikya*, the monthly of the Student Christian Movement of India has also done a bit of such publication.

³³ Published bi-monthly by the Theology Centre, Alleppey.

³⁴ *Jeevadhara*, 25 (January-February 1975).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31 (January-February 1976).

³⁶ 24 Benson Road, Bangalore 560 046.

³⁷ By Duarte Barreto.

³⁸ *IJT*, Vol. II, No. 2 (October 1953).

³⁹ *IJT*, Vol. X, No. 4 (October-December 1961).

⁴⁰ *IJT*, Vol. I, No. 2 (November 1952).

list of seven points which in effect became the agenda of the organizations that eventually became the society side of the CISRS. *Arunodayam*⁴¹ represents a group that started as a pacifist faction of the KYCCA and in its articles on Indian society, which are not many, represents a Sarvodaya and Fellowship of Reconciliation point of view-which are interesting just because they are outside the current mainstream. Some of the occasional publications of the Ecumenical Christian Centre, Whitefield, deal with social questions; I think that the most important of these is *Development: Perspectives and Problems*;⁴² much good work done at Whitefield remains unpublished, alas! The former T. Paul Verghese often treats social questions; I think that his most important volume in this area is *Freedom and Authority*.⁴³ And *The Christian College in Developing India* by Richard D. N. Dickinson⁴⁴ is the key book in a thoughtful but hardly revolutionary Indian study by a keen and frequent contributor to the ecumenical discussions of development.

Which leaves me with the publications of the CISRS which do not need to be detailed because of the recent complete bibliography of all of that work, which includes great analytical detail of the contents of each number of *Religion and Society*.⁴⁵ *The Guardian*, which was a very important part of the CISRS publications programme, is not listed in the bibliography. *The Guardian* editorials and editorial comments by M. M. Thomas, E. V. Mathew, Ninan Koshy, G. R. Karat, J. Russell Chandran and a few others represent the most important ongoing comments on current social affairs in India by Christians that I am aware of. Some of the letters and articles in *The Guardian* are also of considerable importance. The E. V. Mathew Memorial Lectures on *Issues in the Struggle for Justice*⁴⁶ were published after the completion of the bibliography. So was M. M. Thomas' major *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ*.⁴⁷ So were numbers of *Religion and Society* with the themes 'Centre-State Relations',⁴⁸ 'Patterns of Struggle for Justice'⁴⁹ and 'Social Scientists and the War on Poverty'.⁵⁰ The CISRS literature seems to me to

⁴¹ Published monthly by the Christavashram, Manganam P.O., Kottayam 686 018.

⁴² M. A. Oommen (ed.), Madras: CLS, 1973.

⁴³ Madras: CLS-ISPCK-LPH, 1974.

⁴⁴ Madras: Oxford University Press, 1971.

⁴⁵ Cf. footnote 2, *Supra*.

⁴⁶ Frank Thakurdas and Nawaz Dawood, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1975.

⁴⁷ Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1976.

⁴⁸ Vol. XXII, No. 1 (March 1975).

⁴⁹ Vol. XXII, No. 2 (June 1975).

⁵⁰ Vol. XXII, No. 3 (September 1975).

have a number of main themes, many of which are no doubt interconnected in different ways and at various levels. These themes include: Family and Family Planning and Abortion; Peace and Justice; Democracy, Freedom and Election Studies; Caste and Ex-untouchables and Tribals; Community Development, Economic Development and Land Reforms; Gandhian and Sarvodaya Movements and Philosophies; and Religious and Secular Values and Ideologies related to the other social themes above.

What are the doctrinal bases for all of this Christian concern with social questions? Many of the writers, I dare say, agree, for India, with what Rainer Schickele says of the world:

We are witnessing a drama of breath-taking sweep throughout the newly developing world. We are in the second act on which the curtain rose after World War II. The first act started in the wake of the French and American revolutions, around the year 1800. The centre of the stage in the first act was Europe and North America. In the second act, it has shifted from the West to the East and South, to Asia, Africa and Latin America. The central protagonist is the worker, the peasant, the small craftsman, the clerk, the poor man working in the factory, field, workshop, and office. The plot of the drama deals with his frustrations and triumphs as he struggles along his way from subservience to human dignity and citizenship, from poverty to wealth, under the guiding spirit of humanist ideology, of democracy and the equality of man.⁵¹

I firmly believe that Christians are called to aid the success of the drama.

But much of the work of the CISRS seems to me to presuppose the idea of finding Christ acting in our society which M. M. Thomas and P. D. Devanandan helped to contribute to ecumenical thinking about society.⁵² And this has been deepened by the theme of M. M. Thomas' Carey Memorial Lectures⁵³ which has been widely influential as, for instance, in Saral K. Chatterji's 'Humanisation as a Goal of Revolution.'⁵⁴

⁵¹ IM M. A. Oommen (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁵² Cf. Richard W. Taylor, 'Christ Acting in our Society' in Horst Bürkle and Wolfgang M. W. Roth (eds.), *Indian Voices in Today's Theological Debates*, Lucknow: LPH-ISPCK-CLS, 1972.

⁵³ *Salvation and Humanisation*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1971.

⁵⁴ *IyT*, Vol. XXI, No. 4 (October-December 1972).