

# Conference Report

The Triennial Conference of the Indian Christian Theological Association was held at the National Vocation Service Centre, Pune, from December 29, 1977 to January 2, 1978. The theme of the Conference was 'The Concept of the New Man'. The papers presented (which appear in this issue of *ICT*) developed the theme under biblical aspects, ecclesiological discussion and in relation to the secular ideology of Marxism and gave the possibility of exploring the hope man has through Jesus Christ. Another positive development at the Conference was a conscious and sincere effort to reformulate creatively Christian faith in terms of the Indian background and context and thus make a contribution to Indian Christian Theology, which is one of the basic objectives of the ICTA.

The Conference proved a meeting ground for Roman Catholic, Protestant and Syrian Orthodox scholars. There were forty-four participants from various seminaries, churches and Christian institutions. The Conference started under the Chairmanship of Dr J. Russell Chandran. The host, Fr Thomas Thyparampil, Director, N. V. S. Centre, welcomed the participants.

The presentation of papers was followed by workshops where ten to twelve participants met to discuss the papers. The workshop findings and further questions were reported in plenary sessions. The following is a résumé of the main issues discussed at the Conference.

## *1 Questions Arising from the Papers on Marxism*

1. Is Marx's explanation of the origin of capitalist exploitation adequate?

It seems that he does not consider sufficiently the subjective conditions of man, e.g. greed, selfishness, all such influences which in the Bible are presented as powers of sin. He considers only the socio-economic structures.

2. Is there a possibility of recognising, controlling and reversing conditions which lead to exploitation, or are we fettered with an irreversible process of history?

There is a place for and an urgent need of protest against oppressive structures. It is for Christians to present the alternative of 'God's Kingdom' which must be proclaimed in word and deed. Where and how the Kingdom is to be presented is a matter of study and discussion. But it is clear that the Christian must not only be converted interiorly but be committed to the growth of a just society.

3. What are the ethical values on which a just society is to be built?

It may be difficult to agree on a coherent ethical system which would be based on commonly accepted philosophical principles. The Christian has the guidance of the Gospel which condemns oppression in any

form and proclaims man's freedom. For people of other faiths at least a practical consensus for the need of liberation and human rights must be sought and, in fact, has been accepted; it ought to be sufficient for practical action.

4. What are Marxist and Christian eschatologies?

Marxism is committed to create a society where alienation is overcome. This however is (1) an elusive hope, and (2) would benefit those who have not worked for it. Christian eschatology demands commitment to the actual process of transformation; as Jesus' resurrection is God's seal on his life and death for the liberation of man, so those who share in his mission are assured of sharing in his final Kingdom.

## *II The Biblical Concept of the New Man*

1. Can the biblical and Marxist conceptions of the new man be compared?

The biblical idea of the new man is centred on Christ. The Marxist concept has much in common with it; in fact it seems that Marx derived much of his inspiration from the Christian background. However, the Marxian concept misses some dimensions: it takes for granted that man is inherently good and strives towards the beautiful, but it does not explain how. It misses the spiritual and transcendent dimension of man.

The actual challenge of Christianity is found not at the theoretical level, but in the practice of Christian faith. Marx fights in a given situation against the unjust oppressor and helps man in becoming man. On the other hand Christianity seems at times to bypass the oppressive situation; it may become a way towards individual salvation. (Some exemplified it with the preaching of evangelist Billy Graham.) For many God has become unreal; the Gospel of God's Kingdom seems unrelated to the actual situation.

2. What is the relevance of the biblical idea of the New Man for India?

It consists not in the application of abstract principles. The biblical view of the new man is expressed not in theoretical definitions but in the context of actual situations. Thus it has to be realised in the concrete cultural, socio-political and religious context of India.

3. What are the hermeneutical principles underlying the translation of the biblical idea of the New Man to India?

Such an application poses hermeneutical problems. Behind the various Old Testament figures (e.g., Cain and Abel) we see basic structures of humanity in their conflict, under God's judgement, and included in his mercy. God is not a matter of speculation, but is encountered in actual situations. Such an encounter is different from the Indian realisation: Moses being addressed from the burning bush is different from the experience of the Upanishadic seer.

## *III Theological Foundations for the Interpretation of Man*

1. To clarify concepts, the idea of man as the 'image of God' and of man's 'divinisation' were discussed.

Various shades of the meaning of 'image of God' were presented. The basic idea lies in man's total dependence on and union with God.

'Divinisation' in patristic theology does not imply a substantial change in man's nature but participation in and conformity with the divine life, to be realised through union with Jesus Christ.

2. What is the place of conceptual and formulated theology?

In spite of the need of an existential approach, and the necessity of interpreting the biblical message within the Indian context and situation, theology cannot dispense with thematic and systematic thinking. However, theological concepts should remain open ended, related to the varied reality of human situations and historical developments.

3. What is the place of Jesus' earthly life in a theological anthropology?

The question arose from one of the main objections directed by Fr Kappen against Fr Dupuis' paper: how can a Christian anthropology be presented without basing it on God's own action in history, mostly on Jesus' life and mission? Surely the biblical study of Jesus' life and mission, of his place and struggle within the history of his people, vindicated in the Resurrection, is vital for the Christian understanding of man's task and destiny. Still, the Bible itself offers the concepts of the New Man and of Christ as the New Adam and these demand also theoretical reflection on the meaning and goal of human life.

4. Is a separation of the Jesus of history, reflected in the Synoptics, and the Christ of faith in Paul and John justified?

We are no longer so sceptical about the Jesus of history. Though no 'biography' is possible, we are able by means of biblical research to find the Christ of the kerygma transparent already in the data and sayings of the historical Jesus included in the Gospels. Thus the early Christians were able, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to orientate their lives according to Jesus' message, and to interpret his life and death authentically in the context of their own situation.

#### *IV Teilhard de Chardin's View of Man*

1. Is Teilhard scientist or theologian?

His research surely belongs to the realm of science, and his method is part of his scientific work. Yet his vision is biblical not in the sense of biblical research but in single-minded centredness on Jesus Christ. The power of his inspiration derives from the blending of his deep spiritual insight and his scientific competence in presenting the evolving universe. He is able to offer an integrated view of matter, man, universe and Jesus Christ.

2. What is, according to Teilhard, man's specific place in the evolution of the universe?

Man constitutes the noosphere; he is no longer chained into a necessary process of evolution but enters the process of evolution with his freedom. Teilhard's insistence on freedom is a corrective to Marxian determinism and also to Indian fatalism.

3. Is Teilhard's conception of a world moving towards fulfilment realistic or an Utopian dream?

Admittedly there is much progress towards a greater unity of mankind. On the other hand tensions are growing and the fear of catastrophes grips mankind. In the discussion different analogous models of conceptions of world-progress were mentioned such as Aurobindo's. Teilhard knows well man's ability to obstruct the progress of unification, the danger of isolating himself. Thus the movement towards unity is counteracted by hostile powers. It is the task of the Christian not so much to think of the sources of evil as to struggle against the powers of evil.

4. In what way can Jesus be conceived as the Omega point of history?

In Teilhard's view Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of a process of evolution which however is totally God's own creative work. The Omega point of history is achieved not in the Jesus of history but in the *eschaton* when all creation is integrated in its divine origin through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1: 10).

### V Towards an Indian Theology

1. Is not our Christian anthropology (as presented e.g. in Fr. Dupuis' paper) too western?

No doubt much of our theological reflection is derived from and dependent on western thinking. However, there would be little use in replacing western categories with concepts and terms of Indian tradition and philosophy. What is needed is theologizing in an Indian context. Indian theology grows not in research centres but in the actual life of the Christian community and through reflection on its implications.

2. What is the relevance of the contemporary phenomenon of the God-men in India for our Christian anthropology?

It was observed that the spiritual and ethical standing of Gandhi in the actual struggle of India was far higher than the God-men ideals. God's Kingdom is coming in the framework of history, in the 'already' and 'not yet' of the *eschaton*.

3. Is there a danger of syncretism in the development of an Indian theology?

There are two forms of syncretism: (i) In a syncretism where other religious and philosophical traditions are used to express and enrich the Christian tradition without changing the original conception. Such syncretism was found in the early Church in its encounter with the philosophies and religious traditions of the ancient world. (An analogous phenomenon is found also in Hinduism which tends to absorb other cultural and religious traditions.) Such syncretism differs essentially from (ii) the casual acceptance of other views and therefore the mixing with and adopting of different elements which are opposed to the original conception. An Indian theology has to be cautious of the second type of syncretism.

4. What is the attitude of the Christian towards other religions?

In general a positive attitude was advocated, with mutual enrichment, rejecting however what would jeopardise the Gospel. While it

remained difficult to define in the abstract the criterion of what has to be rejected as alien, it was agreed that the decisive feature of an Indian Christian theology is the contextualisation of faith in Jesus Christ within the Indian situation.

5. Is the revelation of the New Man in Jesus Christ universal and valid for all or one of its many realisations in the course of history?

The New Testament presents Jesus simply as the New Man whose life and death have been sealed in the Resurrection. We ought to express this universal dimension of Jesus, his significance for all, by avoiding expressions which have no echo in the Indian situation, and by concentrating on presenting Jesus' relevance for the Indian situation in the life of individuals and society.

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