

Concept of the New Man: Its Social and Political Aspects

ARVIND P. NIRMAL*

My task in this paper is twofold: first, to attempt a conceptual analysis of the notion of the New Man and second, to attempt to construct a concept of the New Man which will speak meaningfully about his social and political responsibilities.

I am glad that the Advisory Committee of this conference wants us to speak and think in terms of a 'concept' of the New Man rather than the New Man himself. For it would be difficult empirically to single out an individual or a group of people and say, 'Here we have the New Man.' It is good to be clear that we are talking about and are primarily concerned with a concept and not with some pigmy or a giant or a superman or some strange new human species. Having said that, however, I do not want to minimise the role of concepts in theological thinking. Concepts can make, shape and unmake men. They are very important in any study of man. For as Heschel writes:

Unlike a theory of things in which we seek merely to know its subject, a theory of man shapes and affects the subject. We not only describe the 'nature' of man, we fashion it. We become what we think of ourselves.¹

When we speak, therefore, of a concept of the New Man, our interest is not merely conceptual. We are interested in the New Man's becoming. Our interest is functional. Any discussion of a concept of the New Man is another way of saying, 'That is how we would like to see ourselves "become."' Let me now turn to the concept of the New Man itself.

We need to recognize at once that here we are dealing with a double concept. It is a double concept because in biblical theology it is used both Christologically and anthropologically. Personally, I do not like to separate Christology and anthropology, but the distinction is valid. A distinction does not necessarily mean a separation. When applied to Jesus, a real man, the New Man is a Christological title and, therefore, very much of a concept. The affirmation of Jesus as the New Man is a faith affirmation and is not to be understood in terms of a biological miracle such as the virgin birth. In other words, the title 'the

* The Rev. Arvind P. Nirmal is Lecturer in Systematic Theology at the United Theological College, Bangalore.

¹ A. J. Heschel, *What is Man?*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1965, p. 7.

New Man' as applied to Jesus is an imaginative construct of the New Testament writers, especially St Paul.

The New Testament also affirms that Jesus is the New Man by virtue of his Incarnation, life, death and Resurrection—a cluster of theological symbols or concepts. Side by side with this Christological affirmation, there is also a theo-anthropological affirmation that Jesus is the first-born of the New Creation and that if any man is 'in Christ' he is a new creation. What is said of Jesus Christologically is made available to man through a theological anthropology. There is a theological 'extension' of this concept of the New Man. Indeed, the New Testament writers do not stop with Christology and anthropology; they also have a concept of the New Cosmos. This point needs to be taken very seriously. The New Testament concept of the New Man cannot be considered in isolation. It is located in the context of the New Cosmos—the whole order of new things. Already, we have here the possibility of relating this concept to social, economic, political, ecological and scientific spheres. The making of the New Man—whether Jesus confessed to be the Christ or ourselves—is a part of the making of the new Cosmic Order. This means that God, Jesus confessed to be the Christ, man and religious, social, economic and political orders are interdependent and interpenetrative. They all renew each other, even as in the process they are all being renewed. This has radical implications for our theological enterprise. This means that our understanding of anthropology in terms of the New Man is not to be a one way traffic—that is, anthropology of the New Man is not to be derived solely from the Christological title, the New Man. This further means that a construction of any Christology is as much dependent upon the insights of anthropology as a theological anthropology is dependent upon the Christology of the New Man.

If my conceptual analysis of the notion of the New Man is correct, then this is the stage in my argument when I must propose my thesis, that the concept of the New Man is an open-ended concept. We cannot define it because any definition of the New Man will make the concept static. It is not to be defined and determined in terms of the Christological title 'the New Man', for that will leave a static Christology on our hands. Besides, as we have seen, we are dealing here with a nexus of interdependent and interpenetrative concepts. Such interdependence, interpenetration and interaction of concepts creates limitless and inexhaustible possibilities for our understanding of the New Man. Such a state of affairs as this gives us inexhaustible understanding of theology, Christology and anthropology. But above all this makes the New Man radically free. 'Becoming' the New Man is not just actualizing inherent potentialities. Interaction, interpenetration and interdependence create and go on creating limitless possibilities and potentialities and the New Man has the freedom to create, choose and accomplish what he wants.

The New Man Jesus Christ is situated in a certain conceptual scheme—the scheme of Creation, Fall and Redemption. The New Man Jesus the Christ is new in relation to the fallen man. The language of the New Man makes sense in the context of this conceptual

scheme. This conceptual scheme also made sense of the anthropological concept of the New Man.

Unfortunately or fortunately, things are not that simple today. Our world view is different from that of the New Testament writers. We understand the world as that which is continually being born rather than the world that *is*. It is Bergson's *élan vital*, Whitehead's *process*, Wieman's *creative advance*, Teilhard's *evolution* and Ernst Bloch's *novum*. Can we then still speak meaningfully of the New Man? New in relation to what? If the world is continually being born, if the world is creatively advancing, if the *novum* is always present in the world, how can we meaningfully speak of the New Man?

One possibility is to reverse the whole conceptual scheme of the past and speak of a *teleological* rather than a *cosmological* fall. The 'old' then is understood in terms of the 'not yet'. But this does not seem to be a very satisfactory solution. This way man remains for ever both 'old' and 'new'. He is always 'old' *teleologically* and always 'new' *cosmologically*. For the cosmos is always on the march. I do not want to say that this is not a viable option. My main objection to such an understanding is that it does not sufficiently emphasize the radicality of the 'new'. The 'new' is radically and poignantly 'new' only in relation to the 'old'. The decisive breakthrough of the new must somehow be maintained. My suggestion, therefore, is that we should understand the old and the new neither *cosmologically* nor *teleologically* but *historically*. This is where the importance of Jesus comes in. Jesus is and must remain the New Man of historical decisiveness. That Jesus is, the New Man is, of course, a faith affirmation. We need not be ashamed of saying that this is not a claim which can be empirically validated. The affirmation that Jesus is the New Man is an imaginative construct of the Christian faith. More precisely, it is an imaginative faith construct of the New Testament writers. We should also make a proper distinction between 'a faith affirmation' and 'a truth claim'. We are not *claiming* that Jesus is the New Man, we are *affirming* or *confessing* that Jesus is the New Man. Such an affirmation or confession is made from within a certain 'faith community' and a certain 'theological system'. This further means that the Christian affirmation that Jesus is the New Man is not exclusive in character. It has no 'claim' character. We do not rule out the possibility that the vision of the New Man and also its affirmation and confession may be different for others. We are not detracting anything from the Christian affirmation when we say that all are involved in the 'quest of the New Being' (Tillich).

As far as our own tradition is concerned, the central Christian and biblical affirmation is that Jesus is the New Man. Cosmology and teleology both, therefore, are derived from the historical Jesus event. It is a theological interpretation of this historical event that can give us a Christian cosmology and a Christian teleology: history first and then cosmology and teleology. The old and the new are radically so only when understood historically. History is what makes the new decisively and radically new. The implication of this historical under-

standing of the old and the new is that we must affirm with full theological confidence that we *are* the 'New Man'. In Jesus, confessed to be the Christ, something decisive has happened. Such an understanding of the new also does justice to the Christian affirmation of the divine-human grace relationship. How do we then understand ourselves? We are the New Man in 'becoming', realising the limitless possibilities created by the divine-human grace relationship. In other words, to use the oft-repeated theological expression, we are 'becoming' what we already are—the New Man.

Above, I have spoken of the interaction, interdependence and interpenetration of God, Jesus confessed to be the Christ, the cosmos and man. I must now propose a category that will do justice to the interplay between these 'realities' and describe them adequately. What is needed for an adequate theological construct, of course, is a fully developed conceptual scheme. It is not possible for me to develop such a full-fledged conceptual scheme here, but I maintain that this can be done. My suggestion is that the category of 'activity' is general enough to lend itself to such an adequate theological construct. There are many advantages in using this category. Firstly, this is a dynamic category. The word 'activity' cannot be conceived along static and passive lines. Secondly, it is sufficiently inclusive. We can speak of God's 'activity', Christ's 'activity', the Cosmic 'activity' and human 'activity'. 'Activity' can be both visible and invisible. The category of 'activity' can also resolve the dichotomy of the personal and the impersonal. We can speak of human activity (personal) and cosmic activity (impersonal). I am not suggesting here that the cosmos cannot be conceived along personal lines. The limited purpose of this statement is to illustrate how the category of 'activity' can overcome the personal-impersonal impasse. Let me now present an understanding of the concept of the New Man in terms of 'activity'.

The New Man represents a centre of various activities—social, economic, political and so on. In socio-economic and political spheres, the New Man activity will be directed towards the creation of just socio-economic and political orders. The New Man activity will take a definite stand against all divisive, exploitative and oppressive forces. Its concern will be for the 'whole' character of society. The New Man activity will strive to overcome the divisions brought about by caste, class, race and colour and sex. For in Christ, the New Man, 'there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ.' Christ the New Man 'is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.'

Of course, the New Man activity has a historical existence and, therefore, will have to make use of socio-economic and political structures and ideologies. In India, the New Man activity will have to co-

operate with the people of leftist orientation since the Indian masses exist and live below the poverty line. The New Man activity in India, therefore, will look upon its political aspect as an instrument of social change and of the creation of an egalitarian social order. The important thing to remember is that the New Man activity will not look upon politics as a means to obtaining power for the sake of power and for oppressive purposes. The New Man activity has the orientation of the 'Servant' ideal. The nature of the New Man activity is such that it will make use of the given structures and ideologies for the creation of the New Man ideal, but it will always transcend these structures and will never consider the structures and ideologies as fetters. The New Man activity will not be committed to these structures and ideologies in absolute terms. The commitment of the New Man activity is not to be understood in terms of ideological consistency or coherence. Its consistency and coherence will be functional. It cannot commit itself to any of the available structures and ideologies permanently and absolutely, because it is always in communication with activities other than socio-economic and political and its concern is for the whole. The New Man activity will always be in search of genuine coherence. This coherence is not simply structural or ideological. It is the coherence of all the possible multiform activities that the New Man activity will seek for. The New Man activity is informed by the vision of the coherence of all things and activities in the Cosmic Christ, the New Man. Nevertheless, this activity in the present will be guided by its bias for the poor, the oppressed, the exploited and the victimised. The New Man activity, therefore, will use its radical freedom in relation to the socio-political structures and ideologies, though it will work in and through them. This will be its 'interim' task till the vision of the final coherence in Christ the New Man is realised.