

Theological Education: Retrospect and Prospect†

CHANDRAN D. S. DEVANESAN*

Introduction

I am grateful to the Master and the Members of the Council of Serampore for inviting me to address this august Convocation. Layman and historian that I am, I agreed to do so with some trepidation as I contemplated the noble past, the great traditions and the latent possibilities for the future of Serampore College.

Some theologians in the Third World are opposed to structures and institutions. But as a historian I see more than the cost of bricks and mortar when I look at an institution built, maintained and nurtured by men dedicated to a Christian purpose. On the 23rd of February this year it will be a 153 years since "Frederick the Sixth, by the Grace of God King of Denmark" bestowed the charter of Incorporation on Serampore College "to promote piety and learning particularly among the native Christian population of India." In India, a country which is littered with the rubble of thousands of institutions that failed to withstand the ravages of the climate, the white ant and foreign invasions, it is no mean achievement when an institution not only survives but carries forward the original purpose of its founders with a deeper understanding and broader vision of its relevance for the future.

The remedy for the ills of institutionalism is not necessarily the destruction of institutions. If the fundamental and historic purpose of an institution is sound then it should be possible to revitalize it by dealing with the accretions of time, by breaking up irrelevant structures, and thereby renewing its sense of direction through fresh and meaningful goals and objectives.

I am sure that all of us assembled here, while not unconscious of the harm done by some types of institutionalism, do hope and pray that God will continue to use Serampore College as a worthy instrument for the promotion of the Christian ministry as long as He sees it fit to do so. Reference is frequently made to the need for Serampore to relate itself to the secular universities. Perhaps in

†This address was delivered at the Convocation of Serampore College, held at T.T.S., Madurai, on February 2nd, 1980.

*Dr Devanesan is Director, Institute for Development Education, Madras.

the providence of God the secular universities may see some day a pattern of autonomy and academic freedom in Serampore from which they would like to profit.

Retrospect and prospect

My interest in theological education goes back to my days in Cambridge when I became acquainted with some of the students and faculty of the theological schools in that ancient seat of learning. But my real exposure to the problems of theological education began when I was a colleague of Dr C. W. Ranson in the National Christian Council. Charlie Ranson was then engaged in writing his monumental study entitled *The Christian Minister in India* which was published in 1945. Looking for another guidepost to mark the passage of time since the appearance of Ranson's germinal work I would pitch upon *The Crisis of Dependency in Third World Countries* by Dr James A. Berquist and Rev. P. Kamar Manickam, first published in 1974. Three decades separate Ranson's Prologue from the Epilogue of Berquist and Manickam. It is helpful to our understanding of both the successes and failures of theological education in India to bear in mind the goals outlined by Ranson and the assessment of what has actually happened after thirty years by Berquist and Manickam.

One of the most illuminating sections of Ranson's book, written while World War II was still raging and much of what lay ahead was still unforeseen, deals with *The Changing Environment of the Church*. It begins with the bold assertion that "it is upon the character and capacity of its indigenous ministry that the future of the Church in India will depend, more than upon any other single human factor." Then follows a masterly analysis of several aspects of the Indian situation that presented a challenge to the theological education of that period.

First, there was the need to train the ministry on the assumption "that standards of general education in India are going to be radically improved." Second, ministerial training should take note of India's growing industrialization and urbanization because "the Christian Church will be called to face the challenge of rapid social change and the issues of social justice which such change will inevitably throw up." Third, Ranson assumed that India would soon be independent and that, therefore, the task of training competent and dedicated ministers was a matter of great urgency. Fourth, Ranson dealt with the intellectual background beginning with a warning that "improved standards of theological education will be bought too dearly if part of the price is the alienation of the ministry from rural interests and sympathies." At the same time he argued that the Church must see to it that "the artificial distinction between the city minister and the rural pastor is banished from the minds of clergy and people alike." And both should be trained to understand the great religious traditions and the new

secular ideologies like Marxism which sway the minds of the people. Fifth, Ranson, looking at the advancing tide of secularism, foresaw that the dominant idea and motive power for increasing numbers of Indians will "move around the main *foci* of social progress and political freedom." Finally, Ranson concluded his stimulating survey with the need for an unconventional and imaginative style of Apologetics which will combine scholarship with Christian devotion and conviction.

How far has theological education in India succeeded in interpreting, updating, and implementing these goals with the assistance of the Theological Education Fund of which Dr Ranson was the first Director? Some of the answers to the question are provided by Berquist and Manickam who also suggest, as Ranson did in his time, what should be the new goals and objectives of theological education today. I would like to highlight one of their major criticisms which is in keeping with some aspects of my own personal understanding of the need for change. I also hold the view that the patterns of the ministry cannot be changed till the rigid, authoritarian structures of the Church are changed. I agree that the churches are dominated "by an authoritarian spirit which makes change difficult precisely because it tends to stifle personal creativity and responsibility." And I sympathise with the sad statement that "the Indian pastor has very few areas of autonomy in his work."

A prophetic ministry to the Church

I would like to set this judgement over against the background of the growing revolutionary edge of the theological view that the Christian Mission in India should be increasingly concerned with the problems of human development and liberation. This involvement in the struggle for social and economic justice will undoubtedly give the Church a relevant role and a prophetic mission to the world. But when we look at the state of the Church and its ministry today, how ready are we for such a dynamic role and for the revolutionary tasks implicit in a theology of liberation? And does the state of affairs now obtaining in the Church in India give us the moral right and the will to attempt such a prophetic mission of solidarity with underprivileged and oppressed people?

There is, therefore, the need for a simultaneous prophetic ministry that seeks to reform the Church along with the prophetic ministry of the Church to the world. And there are two sides to this badly needed reformation of the Church in India. The first is the need to deal effectively with the patterns of Church governance and the role and status of the ministry inherited from the missionary past. As many critics have pointed out, the present patterns of the ministry are still only partially modified forms of outdated western models

neither adequately related to the Indian situation nor true to the biblical understanding of the roles and functions of the minister in the diverse forms of Christian service.

The other side of the picture is the need for radical social change within the Church itself before it can hope to take to a revolutionary role with integrity. I do not need to labour the point that the Church is full of the very inequalities and social injustices it proposes to deal with in the wider Indian society of today. The clergy are not automatically exempt from these social evils as is all too evident from their involvement in the caste and linguistic politics that continue to mar the image of the Church in the eyes of the Indian people.

If we claim that theological education must train ministers to fight for social and economic justice, to identify with liberation and protest movements of various kinds, then let us make sure that such radicalism begins by permeating and transforming the Church so that the prophetic Christian voice will have the ring of honesty and truth about it. Let us not make liberation theology an escape route from the prerequisite and difficult task of revolutionizing the Church from within.

Another problem facing the Church and theological institutions which has both a positive and a negative aspect is the thorny question of language. The need for educating ministers up to a very high level in the Indian languages is an imperative which has long been recognized. The Tamilnadu Theological Seminary has the proud distinction of being the first institution in India to provide theological education up to the BD level in a regional language. And the Principal, Dr Gnana Robinson, boldly asserts that Arasaradi has "now proved that theological education can be more effectively done in regional languages not only at graduate level but also at post graduate levels."

While this is a matter for rejoicing, we must remember not every theological school teaching in a regional language has as yet achieved the status of Arasaradi. There is always the danger of the linguistic narrowness and parochialism which poses so many problems for the country also infecting the minds of theological students. It is tragic that the "sons of the soil" bias has already turned many a Christian institution into a narrow vested interest supported stoutly by both the laity and the clergy. Can we ensure that theological students, if taught exclusively in a regional language, do not succumb to this parochial outlook which is opposed to the spirit of the Christian community within the wider community and the need for national cohesion? While we have to be loyal and dedicated in the work we have to do in local and regional situations and cultures, we should ensure that the national and the international, the ecumenical and the universal are not absent from the life, thought and action of

Christians, whether they are in Church-related or secular vocations. Are these not lessons we must apply from the new concepts of Christian humanism?

I am aware that I could be charged with harbouring a sentimental universalism or of ignoring hard sociological realities that cannot be changed overnight. But surely there is a distinction between men like Burke who thought of politics as the art of compromise and Jesus of Nazareth who strove "to found the new Israel in the heart of the old," to bring a new humanity to birth. If the regeneration of the Church is to depend on common sense and compromise, are we true to Christ the Liberator? Is the Cross a symbol of human adjustment and worldly wisdom? Are we seeking to establish the "new Israel" understood in Indian terms within our old traditional societies so that the signs of a new humanity coming to birth are evident in our land? I put these questions in all sincerity to those who have graduated today: Are you going to compromise, both in your personal lives and in your ministry, with the social evils within the Church or have you the courage to stand against them? Are you on the side of Amos or Amaziah after all the training you have received in contextualization?

The skyscrapers and the chawls

Every recent book I have read on theological education in India and Asia rightly affirms that the Church and its ministry must be committed to its mission to the rural areas and the peasantry. Kiyoko Takeda Cho speaks of the struggle for social justice for poverty-stricken hungry masses as a source of "indigenous energy." That the Church has to be involved in this "energy triggered off by despair and want" is also a historic insight as far as the rural areas are concerned since the Russian and Chinese peasants disproved the Marxist contention that the industrial workers are the main instruments of revolution. The Church's growing understanding that the map of India and Asia is covered by paddy fields, villages and folk cultures is a significant departure from its former concentration on urban situations.

And yet I feel impelled to stress the tremendous importance of the mission of the Church to the big cities, the Ninevehs of our time. We can also be tempted to loiter in the shade of some pleasant rural vegetation like Jonah by refusing to see the need for a prophetic mission in our increasingly complex urban situations. We must not forget that India stands seventh in the world in terms of rapid urbanization.

I do not wish to start an argument as to which is the more difficult task—the mission to the villages or the mission to the towns and cities. But who cannot help being concerned about the way in which many of the elitist churches in our big cities carry on with an astonishing nonchalance in the midst of the massive problems that seethe all around them? Here liberation must surely mean liberation from inertia

and indifference to begin with. But do we have a Christian ministry with sufficient training and in-depth understanding of the urban situation? It is true that churches are aware of the slums and civic needs of water supply and sanitation. It is true that churches have building societies, housing colonies and homes for the aged. It is true that churches have developed forms of urban-industrial mission that deal with the problems of management and labour. And if India found in Mahatma Gandhi a voice for the voiceless millions in the villages, today we have another charismatic figure who symbolizes the Christian concern for the utterly destitute thrown on to the garbage heap of big city life in the person of Mother Teresa. But have we fully understood the role of the cities in the painful but inevitable process of leading India out of the feudal and the medieval into a future which demands some necessary breaking away from the past?

We must learn to listen to our critics. Perhaps one of the harshest and yet very perceptive critics is V.S. Naipaul whose recent book, *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), is worth study. We need to ponder over some of his analytical statements like the following: "The turbulence in India this time hasn't come from foreign invasion or conquest; it has been generated from within. India cannot respond in her old way by a further retreat into archaism. Her borrowed institutions have worked like borrowed institutions; but archaic India can provide no substitutes for press, parliament, and courts. The crisis of India is not only political or economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead."

While rural poverty constitutes a tremendous challenge, let us not romanticize the stagnation and the archaism of the lingering feudalism which exists in the countryside. The rural areas cannot be transformed without the centres of social change which are the cities. It is in the cities that the old social barriers are being broken down and new solutions have to be found which are not inherent in Indian history and culture. The cities are our laboratories for social experimentation and radical change which will in turn help to transform rural life. The new types of community life that India needs are being forged on the anvils of the city.

And this is in keeping with our Christian historical insights, for neither the writer of the Book of Revelation nor St Augustine had an apocalyptic vision of a transformed rural society. The historic struggle is between the city of darkness and the city of light. And ultimately it is the City of God that is the end and fulfilment of history. Let us not, like Jonah, get swallowed into the dark belly of rural poverty and accept what has existed for millennia as a way of life, as an escape from Nineveh. The urban Christian Mission in India is not simply urban renewal—trying to rebuild on the debris of the past—but building cities of the future that will be a foretaste of the City of God.

Christian involvement in Indian culture

Before I conclude, let me share one more problem that has been a concern of mine for many years which I would sum up as *Christ and Indian culture*. We talk of relating to Indian culture or of indigenisation as if we are dealing with something external to ourselves. Often indigenisation is only the adding of frills to give our activities a kind of Indian look. Therefore I prefer to speak of a deep and fundamental involvement in Indian culture rather than use the term "indigenisation."

We are familiar with the constantly repeated statement that the pluralism of India can be understood as a pattern of unity in diversity. But is there a Christian contribution of real significance which is part of this diversity of Indian culture especially in the arts and crafts? The problem here is that there has been no "Christian period" in Indian history like the Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim period, each with its rich residue of a cultural heritage of art and architecture, song and dance, epic poetry and powerful drama. My contention, therefore, is that while there can be a renaissance of Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic cultures in the totality of Indian culture, we cannot speak of a renaissance of Christian culture. As we look at the composite picture of Indian culture we have to realize in all humility that the Christian contribution to it lies not in the past but in the future. And yet this is an opportunity which calls for tremendous imagination and creativity.

I believe that our theological institutions should ponder deeply over this question of how Christians can be so involved in our culture as to release a vital Christian contribution into the main stream of the creative arts of our country. We have spoken of the Church's mission to rural India, to urban India. But if we can only recapture the spirit of the Church as a great patron of the arts we would also be thinking and doing much more to involve ourselves in the centres of artistic creativity in India in the visual, the plastic and the performing arts so that the story of Jesus becomes part and parcel of the life of our people like the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* and the Christian Gospel becomes as familiar as the *Thirukural* or the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Conclusion : The next 100 years

Finally, let me end by sharing two thoughts with you from the pages of Ranson's book. The first is his passing reference to the possibility "of a prophetic ministry of the *sadhu* type." Such a ministry, if it were possible to generate one, would have several advantages such as freedom from too much control by the Church, freedom from administrative work, freedom to move about the country and keep wider visions alive and freedom to experiment with various forms of Indian spirituality. It is a suggestion with exciting possibilities worth thinking about when planning innovative patterns of the ministry for the future.

The second thought from Ranson is his challenging statement that, "In thinking of the Christian ministry in India we dare not plan for less than a hundred years." What tremendous changes the world has seen since Ranson wrote those words in the middle of this century! We are on the threshold of another century and we do not have to be futurologists to sense what immense dangers and possibilities lie ahead of us in a world of rapid changes unlike anything in the previous history of mankind. Are we preparing for a theological training and a ministry adequate for the next century or have we succumbed to an existentialism that is concerned only with the immediate and the contemporary, an existentialism that has no use for any theology of hope? Are we still living off the diminishing capital of a theological education and a pattern of the ministry of a dying past or are we minting the coinage which can be the currency of the next hundred years of sterling witness in India by words and deeds that will ring true like the words and deeds of our eternal contemporary, Jesus Christ? The answer, my friends who have graduated today, is blowing in the wind, the wind of the Holy Spirit that bloweth where it listeth. May you breathe it in so that the Holy Spirit may enable each one of you to find your true mission and vocation in life as ministers of Jesus Christ which is both God's gift to you and your gift to Him.