

# Vision for Church and Society

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**I**n this article we discuss some of the reflections on Church and Society provided by the World Council of Churches as well as the Indian Christian theologians. If the first section is on the WCC reflections, the second is on reflections by Indian thinkers, and finally we conclude with a brief analysis of the matter studied on church and society. In the first section we have looked into what the Commission on Faith and Order, the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, the sub-unit on Church and Society etc. have got to say on the theme 'Church and Society'. We have also briefly noted the new structure of the WCC which has become operational from the beginning of 1992 and the new units like 'Justice, Peace and Creation' and 'Sharing and Service' which will be looking into issues related to Church and Society. In the second section we glance at the reflections of people like T. V. Philip, Mathai Zachariah, M. M. Thomas, S. J. Samartha, Nirmal Minz, A. P. Nirmal, K. C. Abraham and Paulos Gregorios, as well as of the All Indian Council of Christian Women on the subject Church and Society.

## **1. Church and Society in the perspective of the World Council of Churches :**

The Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches initiated at its meeting in Lima, Peru, in 1982 a study programme on the Unity of the Church and the Renewal of Human Community. The integration of the results of many consultation during 1984-89 has been attempted in the document published by the Faith and Order Standing Commission in 1990<sup>1</sup> and the text struggles to find what can be said together today about God's call to the churches to seek unity and to be signs and instruments of the renewal of the human community. The document invites churches to consider, both individually and together, "the affirmation that the visible unity of Christ's church, and the renewal of human community, are both rooted in the Triune God's will and are therefore closely inter-related"<sup>2</sup> It also invites all to consider the implications of this affirmation "for the faith, order, life and witness of the church in each place and for the churches together on their pilgrimage towards visible unity."<sup>3</sup>

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According to the document the renewal is never for the members of the church alone ; the renewal of the church is always for the sake of the human community.<sup>4</sup> The Church and Humanity have a common origin and common goal which is explained in the following way :

In God's creation all human beings are made in the image of God. In the Kingdom of God both the church and the whole of humanity have their goal. It is, therefore, in this dimension of their common origin and common goal that the inter-relation of church and humanity in their struggle for renewal and unity can best be understood. This points also to the wider framework of the history of God's saving action, in which the church participates as mystery and prophetic sign, as a communion in and for the world.<sup>5</sup>

The church has to live as that force within humanity through which God's will for the renewal, justice, community and salvation of all people is witnessed to. The church is sent by God to witness to, and proclaim the Kingdom in and for, this broken world through word and deed, life and suffering. For this the church is continually strengthened by Christ's word and sacrament, and endowed with the gifts of the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

The document speaks of the church as mystery and prophetic sign and presents an understanding of the church in its worshipping communion, witness and service for the renewal of human community.<sup>7</sup> It says :

“The concept of sign indicates especially the essential relation between church and world. Called by God out of the world the church is placed in the world's service ; it is destined to be God's sign for the world by proclaiming the gospel and living a life of loving service to humanity. It is thus God's pointer to what God wants to tell the world and to give to it. Thus the church is called constantly to look both to its Lord, to whom it owes all, and to humanity, to which it is fully committed.”<sup>8</sup>

The WCC's Commission of the Churches on International Affairs which has a long history of about fortyfive years behind it believes that engagement in sociopolitical affairs is part of the mission of the churches.<sup>9</sup> Its aim has been pointed out as “to witness to the lordship of Christ over human beings and history by serving people in the field of international relations and promoting reconciliation and oneness of human beings”.<sup>10</sup> To mention some of its endeavours : South Africa has received the maximum attention from the WCC from the beginning of the seventies. The WCC provided support to liberation movements

and to the churches of South Africa. It exposed Western connivance and collaboration, calling for economic sanctions and promoting an intensive educational programme in the churches in Western countries.<sup>11</sup> On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the effort of the WCC to assist processes for peace have been based on the following points<sup>12</sup> : (a) the withdrawal of Israeli troops from all territories occupied in 1967; (b) the right of all states, including Israel and the Arab states, to live in peace with secure and recognized boundaries; (c) the affirmation of the rights of the Palestinians to self-determination including the right of establishing a sovereign Palestinian state. The WCC has urged the mutual recognition of Israelis and Palestinians.

The WCC has taken up problems of human rights violations. The Nairobi Assembly in 1975 described human rights as (a) the right to basic guarantees of life; (b) the rights to self-determination and to cultural identity, and the rights of minorities (c) the right to participate in decision-making within the community; (d) the right to dissent; (e) the right to personal dignity; and (f) the right to religious freedom.<sup>13</sup> The CCIA in the last fifteen years has brought out many documents on human rights matters. Matters of human rights in Africa, Middle East, Lebanon, the West Bank, Korea, Kampuchea, Vietnam, Philippines, the Pacific, New Caledonia, El-Salvador and number of other regions and countries have been dealt with by *CCIA Background Information*.<sup>14</sup> The Vancouver Assmebly in 1983 encouraged the churches to fight against the increasingly sophisticated forms of physical and psychological torture, religious fanaticism and political fundamentalism, and the denial of the right of workers and refugees.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of the 'responsible society' which emerged at the Amsterdam Assembly in 1948 served as the basic framework for ecumenical social thought for two decades and this was "an attempts to keep in balance the demands of freedom and justice within a democratic order, based on the recognition of essential human rights".<sup>16</sup> It was at the world conference on "Church and Society" in Geneva in 1966 and at the Fourth WCC Assembly in Uppsala in 1968 that the ecumenical movement recognised the requirement of deep changes in world economic and political structures for the achievement of global human justice and economic growth. Thus emerged a new concept of 'a just, participatory and sustainable society' and the focal point in this new orientation has been justice.<sup>17</sup> The Vancouver Assembly furthered this process by interlinking justice and peace; there can be no peace without justice and there can be no justice without

peace. The Canberra Assembly in 1991 can be considered as completing the process by linking the search for justice and peace with the preservation of the integrity of creation, in its theme "Come, Holy Spirit—Renew the whole Creation."

As early as 1966, *the World conference on Church and Society* declared:

"Christians still differ as to whether military means can be legitimately used to achieve objectives which are necessary to justice. But nuclear war goes beyond all bounds. Mutual nuclear annihilation can never establish justice because it destroys all that justice seeks to defend or achieve."<sup>18</sup>

There took place a public hearing on "Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament" in 1981 organized by the sub-unit on Church and Society and the CCIA.<sup>19</sup> It was noted that though any war is an undoubted evil, yet most Christians in most ages have believed that there are circumstances in which fighting can be the lesser of two evils. Theology can provide no easy answers. The overall insight emerged was that the spiral development of nuclear weapons has started a process of reformulating christian approaches and attitudes to war and pacifism. Noted that "moral condemnation of nuclear weapons can lead to a more unanimous political response and to a common position of 'nuclear pacifism, although the position on conventional war will still differ."<sup>20</sup>

The new structure of the WCC which has become operational from the beginning of 1992, has five major components, namely, four Units: 'Unity and Renewal', 'Mission, Education, and Witness', 'Justice, Peace and Creation', 'Sharing and Service' and a group of offices in the General Secretariat dealing with Relationships and Communications. The third unit *Justice Peace and Creation* will deal with matters like the following: Justice, Peace and Intergration of Creation: a Conciliar Process; Theological, Ethical, Socio-Economic and Ecological Analysis; Economic Justice; Peace Ministries and Conflict Resolution; Indigenous People, Land Rights and Racism; Human Rights; Concerns and Perspectives of Women; Concerns and Perspectives of Youth; Education on Issues of Justice, Peace and Creation; Churches' Response to International Affairs; and Communication as power.<sup>21</sup>

In the new programmic structure the focus of addressing ecumenical concerns of justice, peace and integrity of creation<sup>22</sup> will be the four areas of covenanting approved by the 1990 world convocation on JPIC namely economic justice, peace and reconciliation, environment and the struggle against racism. A draft document on 'Economy as a matter of faith: an ecumenical

statement on economic life' has been discussed by the Central Committee and the member churches and the final version is supposed to be out during 1992. The WCC through its member churches contributed to the June 1992 'earth summit'— the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. The Unit III also plans programmes for the full participation of women and youth in church and society. During 1991 importance was given to the emerging issue namely 'violence against women'. The 1993 Ecumenical Global Gathering of Youth and Students is being planned in collaboration with two Catholic student organization, the world bodies for the YMCA and YWCA and the World student Christian Federation.

The fourth unit *sharing and service* is concerned with the following matters: solidarity by sharing resources; service of human need; comprehensive diakonia; development of human resources; new models for sharing and service; and Biblical and theological analysis.<sup>23</sup> Diaconal work continues to occupy a good deal of the WCC's attention, whether it be the plight of Kurdish refugees from Iraq, food shortages in the Horn of Africa, influx of refugees into Zimbabwe, cyclones in Bangladesh, floods in China, earthquakes in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Costa Rica and the Philippines. The WCC along with U. N. has called attention to the estimated 30 million people who are displaced within their own countries and the particular needs of the children who make up more than half of the world's refugees. The plight of the migrant workers is also looked into by the WCC in collaboration with Muslim organisation.<sup>24</sup>

## **2: Some Indian Reflections on Church and Society:**

T. V. Philip in analysing the ecclesiological discussions in India between 1950 and 1975 has pointed out three main elements namely the self—identity of the Church, the Church as an open community and the unity of the Church.<sup>25</sup> These three are interrelated and they are discussed in the context of the Church's witness in contemporary society. In all these three concerns the major issue raised is the form of the Church's presence in a society of religious and ideological pluralism and in a society of social revolution. To quote

“Rayan speaks of the need for Christianity's 'Kenotic incarnation' in India. For the sake of Christian presence in the social revolution, E. V. Mathew and others plead for break away movement within the Church with a commitment to specific social goals. In order to be open

to religious and cultural pluralism, M. M. Thomas raises the possibility of forming Christ centred fellowships within Hinduism... D. A. Thanga Swami observes: There are enough indications that the Universal Church of the future will be the church of one Lord and perhaps one truth but not of one 'birth' if that means Baptism. As an answer to crisis of authority and the quest of modern society for an authentic community, Paul Varghese suggests the formation of experimental Christian Communities (with the possibility of even men of other faiths joining).<sup>26</sup>

Philip has emphasised the point that "It is by understanding ourselves as part of the history of the Indian nation and by participating in the divine movement in the life of our people that we shall understand what it means to be a Church in India".<sup>27</sup> Through a study of the Asian theologians, he demonstrates that all of them move away from the understanding of the Church as an institution; their emphasis is on people, their commitment and participation.<sup>28</sup> He says:

"For Chenchiah and Chakkarai, the Kingdom of God has central place in the Gospel. The Church is the fellowship (nerve centre) of Christians engaged in the transformation of the world towards the new creation. It takes place in the steam of life and is best expressed in the spirit filled fellowships. Kagawa saw the Church as a movement, a counter movement of man's participation in the movement of God's self-sacrificing love for the world.... For the Korean Theologians the Church is the unification of God and revolution. Aloysius Pieris speaks of the Church as structural revolution. Different frontier groups experience the emergence of an invisible *ecclesia* which is transforming the historical reality and is introducing a new history."<sup>29</sup>

Mathai Zachariah who was associated with the policies and programmes of the National Council of Churches in India for the last three decades, has the following to say in the search for an authentic expression of the Indian Church:

"During the earlier part of the last twenty-five years we talked a lot about the '*Identity of the Indian Church*'. Then we tried to look '*beyond identity*', and '*on the participation*'. Then we talked of the '*Church as a people's movement*'. The question today is how the '*Christian participation in nation building*' of which we talked a lot soon after independence-be effectively carried out avoiding our two besetting sins of elitism and tokenism.<sup>30</sup> M. M. Thomas tells us that inter-church ecumenism in India has to be set within the framework of Christian dialogue

with other religions and secular ideologies; if 'classical ecumenism' meant dialogue among the churches on faith and order, 'contemporary ecumenism' means Christian openness to other religions and secular ideologies.<sup>31</sup> A new concept of secularism has to be evolved in India reinforced by renascent religions including Christianity to stand the onslaughts of communalism and religious fundamentalism on the one hand and the totalitarianism of dogmatic secularism on the other.<sup>32</sup> The Indian situation calls for a renewal of religious traditions in the light of secular human values and the renewal of secularism in the light of religious spirituality.<sup>33</sup> Thomas says:

"In a pluralistic situation, which is now everywhere in the world, human neighbourhood community can be based only on an open secularism, that is, a secular anthropology open to and reinforced by different religions, ideologies and cultures. And Christ-centred humanism has the best opening of making its impact in this dialogic social existence. I submit that this is the cultural mission of Christian ecumenism in contemporary society, and more especially in India."<sup>34</sup>

We have to evolve new non-communal forms of fellowship in Christ which can spiritually penetrate the life of India at all levels and in this lies the Church's future in India.<sup>35</sup> The important question is how can the self-identity of the Church find expression in a noncommunal form in pluralistic India? The Church in India is obsessed with minority religious community consciousness and this is a major hinderance in taking its evangelistic as well as social prophetic mission to Indian people seriously.<sup>36</sup> The Indian Church has to grow from an aggressive religious communality into a servant religious community, concerned with developing the first fruits and signs of the Kingdom to come in the life of the State, the Society and the Church in our present situation and thus rejecting both individualist pietism and apocalyptic millenarianism.<sup>37</sup> The communal character of the Indian church is manifested through following matters:<sup>38</sup> Christians have formed covert political parties in Kerala, Tamilnadu etc; they have too often gone to the court for special protection of their educational institutions rather than for equal protection; they have a special Christian personal law to guide their marriage, divorce, succession and other family relations; and there is competition between Christian denominations and between Christians and other communities to build up educational and other institutioan to buttress the communal morale. The Indian Church of the future has to struggle to overcome these communal trends.

S. J. Samartha points out that the Indian Church of the future has to take seriously into account the interrelated factors of the influence of the science and technology on the one hand and religious pluralism on the other.<sup>39</sup> The Church has to struggle with the basic assumptions of science, its world view and understanding of human nature and destiny. We have to reflect on the social role of technology in changing ways of thinking, styles of life and the relations of people to the products of technology. The Church has the responsibility to respond to military technology which alters the power relationships between nations. Also we have to take a stand on the ethical consequences of technology, for example in the allotment of resources for development programmes and injustice in distribution of technological products. How to respond to the scientific revolution on the basis of insights from the Christian faith is an important question for the Indian Church to answer.<sup>40</sup>

Regarding church and religious pluralism Samartha clearly says that we cannot limit the work of God's spirit only to members of the visible institutional Church. The Spirit of Christ is working among people who are concretely engaged in the struggle for justice and truth, and the Church has to identify itself with their struggle. The promise of Jesus that his Spirit will lead us into all truths (Jn. 16. 13) indicates that fulness of truth is still on the way and so we can never be content with the past traditions alone.<sup>41</sup> According to Samartha

“As we move into the future we face common human problems and share a common future, and that therefore in tackling these problems, we need to co-operate with neighbours of other faiths and ideological convictions. We are indeed committed to God in Christ and to take part in God's continuing mission in the world. But distinctiveness, not exclusiveness, uniqueness, not 'only-ness'. Participation in God's continuing work rather than one way proclamation of the word may have to be the marks of the Church of the future.”<sup>42</sup>

Bishop Nirmal Minz noted that the Churches so far have only negatively related themselves to the traditional religious reassertions in terms of revival movements. The Church has not yet faced the tribal traditional heritage in a sound manner. To quote:

“In future the Church cannot brush aside the tribal cultural heritage altogether. She must...enter into dialogue with tribal heritage.... The witness of the Church should involve her in the deeper aspects of the tribal life. The mission of the

Church should be expressed in relation to the total situation of the tribal life of the people as they struggle for the more abundant life and seek for its religious and cultural foundations."<sup>43</sup>

The Dalit Christians' life experiences are one of the important bases for theologising by the Indian Church. A. P. Nirmal points out that there is a shift from philosophy to sociology, from propositions to people's life experiences in the theological method of the Indian Church and the movement of Dalit theology is from below and it is more interested in the horizontal relations than in the vertical revelation.<sup>44</sup> At the same time A. P. Nirmal also suggests that we have to move forward from anthropocentric paradigm of theology to cosmic paradigm of theology which sees humans in relation to the whole creation of God and in which each local church becomes God's micro-cosmos, a local manifestation of the whole of cosmos.<sup>45</sup> A group of organisms of different kinds living together in one kind of environment is called an ecosystem and in the Oikos there are several such ecosystems which are organismically related to each other i.e., they affect each other and are mutually affected by each other.<sup>46</sup> And about the local church in this context Nirmal says :

"It represents the cosmic nexus of ecosystem. In its organismic relationship with ecosystems, it should reflect caring, commitment, pledge and responsibility that God has towards His/Her creation. That is the Church's ecological mission."<sup>47</sup>

Mission is to be understood now as cosmic ; it is for the whole cosmos ; its aim is the transformation of the whole cosmos ; the whole cosmic process is God's mission process and the Church has no mission in isolation as such.<sup>48</sup> According to A. P. Nirmal "in such a cosmic mission, humans and all else mutually indwell each other... share each other, correct each other... and sustain each other."<sup>49</sup> And so as K. C. Abraham points out, the challenge is to express our solidarity with people of other faiths in common quest, action, shared values and spirituality.<sup>50</sup> We are specially committed to a struggle for liberation along with the marginalised groups who see the inter-connectedness between the renewal of society and the renewal of the earth and who are victims of the so called 'development' which has made them poorer and destroyed their traditional environment.<sup>51</sup>

From 'the U. N. World Decade for Women: Equality, Development and peace' (1975-1985) the Christian community has straight away entered into 'the Ecumenical Decade of the churches in Solidarity with women' (1988-1998). Of course this

is not another Women's Decade but rather a Decade of churches in solidarity with women i. e., the churches must take the initiative to actualise their solidarity with world women. The theme for the Ecumenical Decade in India is: 'A new community, a living community' and three main thrusts of the Decade are pointed out<sup>52</sup> as

- (1) Affirming women as able individuals made in the image of God; helping them to throw off the 'I am only a women' mentality.
- (2) More participation of women in the Church, in the liturgy, decision making bodies and in ordained ministry.
- (3) Identifying and removing all forms of oppression against women in church and society.

Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios has tried to demonstrate that "neither political morality nor justice, neither a lasting peace nor a healthy environment, can be established on the existing foundations of our civilizations built on a secular, non-transcendent, pseudo-rational perception of reality".<sup>53</sup> He further adds that we have to go deeper into our own heritage of Adivasi Culture of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism at its best, as well as our heritage from Central and West Asia.<sup>54</sup> What is needed is some pioneering in the area of alternate styles or ways of community life, integrating the eucharistic apostolic with the political- economic.<sup>55</sup>

### 3. Conclusion :

In the WCC reflections on Church and Society we see an evolution from 'responsible society' (Amsterdam Assembly, 1948) to 'a just, participatory and sustainable society (World Conference on 'Church and Society' 1966; Uppsala Assembly 1968) to 'an integral relation between justice and peace' (Vancouver Assembly 1983) to, 'justice, peace and integrity of creation' (Canberra Assembly, 1991). The social thought of the Indian Church has focussed on themes like the following in its evolution since independence: 'Christian participation in nation building', 'Identity of the Indian Church', and 'Church as a people's movement.'

According to the Commission on Faith and Order of the WCC, the unity of churches and the renewal of the human community are integrally related as both the church and humanity have a common origin and common goal namely image and Kingdom of God respectively. The Church has to live as that force within humanity through which God's will for the renewal, justice, community and salvation of all people is witnessed to. The WCC's

Commission of the Churches on International Affairs has served in the field of international relations promoting reconciliation and oneness of human beings as well as taking up problems of human rights violations. The public hearing on 'Nuclear Weapons and Disarmament' organised by the sub-unit on Church and Society and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs in 1981 noted that a moral condemnation of nuclear weapons can lead to a common position of nuclear pacifism' although the position of the individual churches on conventional war will still differ.

In the new structure of the WCC the third unit entitled 'Justice, peace and Creation' and the fourth unit entitled 'sharing and Service' deal with issues related to Church and Society. The focus of addressing ecumenical concerns of justice, peace and integrity of creation is proposed to be the four areas of economic justice, peace and reconciliation, environment, and the struggle against racism. The unit 'Sharing and Service' while concentrating on diaconal work in different parts of the world, also pays attention to problems of displaced people, refugees, migrant workers etc.

It is by understanding ourselves as part of the history of the Indian nation and by participating in the divine movement in the life of our people that we shall understand what it means to be a Church in India. A Christ-centred humanism has the best opening of making its impact in the Indian dialogic social existence. We face common human problems, and share a common future and therefore in tackling these problems we need to co-operate with neighbours of other faiths and ideological convictions. We have to evolve new non-Communal forms of fellowship in Christ. The Church has to be concerned with developing the first fruits and signs of the Kingdom to come in the life of the state and Society.

The Dalit Christian's life experience are an important basis for theologising by the Indian church and the witness of the church should involve her in the deeper aspects of the Indian tribal life. The Indian church is taking the initiative to actualise its solidarity with women, affirming women as able individuals, encouraging more participation of women in the church and removing all forms of oppression against them.

The Indian Church moves forward from anthropocentric paradigm of theology to Cosmic paradigm of theology which sees humans in relation to the whole creation of God, and in which each local church becomes God's micro-cosmos with organismic relationship with the cosmic nexus of ecosystem. The whole cosmic process is God's mission and the Church's mission is the participation in this. In such a cosmic mission, humans and all

else mutually indwell each other, share each other, correct each other and sustain each other.

The Indian Church may have to question the existing foundations of our civilisations built on a secular nontranscendent, pseudo-rational perception of reality. The church has to reflect on the basic assumptions of science, the social role and ethical consequences of technology, and respond to the scientific—technological revolution on the basis of insights from the Christian faith.

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