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Author(s): M. M. THOMAS

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TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF SECULAR HUMANISM

M. M. THOMAS

Entanglement and Disentanglement

IT IS OFTEN SAID that the Church is too entangled with the world, that it has identified itself with East or West in the political struggle, that it has settled down in contemporary culture and made itself at home with national, racial and class ideologies, and that in repentance it should disentangle itself. This emphasis, coming in the modern period from European theology, has helped the Church to regain its independence from the old disintegrating order, and has set it on the road to seek

M. M. Thomas of India was formerly a Secretary and Vice-President of the World Student Christian Federation and is now Secretary of its University Commission. This summary of a speech to the officers of the Federation was printed in its quarterly, THE STUDENT WORLD, 2nd Quarter, 1953.

for the City whose builder and maker is God. But too often the advocates of disentanglement of the Church from the world do not go on to make clear that any withdrawal from the world must be made only in order that the Church may re-enter it with Christ. Too often in the recent past Christianity has become an appendage of a pagan movement of secular humanism, in which man's capacity for self-redemption has been affirmed. And it was right that a prophetic protest against this should arise in the Church itself. But the Christian in the world cannot live on protests; his life is a continual involvement in the secular world of nature and man. Unless the principles of a positive involvement are worked out, protest-theology can create a vacuum which may turn out to be as perilous as that unscrupulous involvement. The Christian doubtless needs to be constantly reminded that he is a pilgrim who should not settle down and make the world his home. But even a pilgrim needs to set up temporary tents along his way. The Christian opposition to pagan humanism should be in the name of a true humanism, I might even say a Christian humanism, in spite of the suspicion that phrase may arouse in the minds of some Christians.

The Gospel and Secular Faiths

THE SIGNIFICANCE of the Second Report of the Commission on Christian Hope of the World Council of Churches is that it deals with precisely this question of the relation of the Gospel to the secular utopias of today. No ecumenical document has been more relevant to the situation we face in the world, and I hope it will be studied throughout the Federation. The Report takes up three secular ideologies which appeal to modern man, and places them in the light of the Christian Gospel: stalinism, scientific humanism and democratic utopianism. Let us look at the Commission's interpretation of the rise of these ideologies and of the reason for their perversion.

First, the Report says that all these ideologies "in some way bear witness to the great disturbance which God's revelation in Christ has made in the world," for "it is in part at least the ferment set up by its preaching and life which has brought these ferments in the world." In other words, the human aspirations which are basic to these various ideologies have their origin in the Christian revelation. The passion for social justice which underlies the origins of stalinism, the search for rational truth which is basic to scientific humanism, and the principles of human individuality and social equality which lie behind democratic utopianism—all these have their roots in the Christian understanding of man and the world.

Secondly, the Report answers the question: why have they betrayed their original humanitarian purposes? We know that stalinism has destroyed the social revolution in the process of making it and has become a new form of social oppression. Scientific humanism has produced techniques of engineering natural and social forces which serve to destroy human values. Democratic utopianism, with its faith in the "freedom of the individual," has destroyed mutual responsibility and the values of individuality and equality. Why this betrayal? Why has humanism in many parts of the world turned into its opposite? The Report answers: because humanism came to be separated from its original Christian roots. "... in our day, in one way or another, these various aspirations have escaped the setting and discipline of the gospel of Jesus Christ, wherein alone they can be espoused without the most terrible perversion." Outside the Christian setting, men use these movements to "assume a status and a posture under the sun which does not belong to them" and thus "destroy their very manhood and that of their fellows."

In this context we must ask: where do we see the results of man's rebellion against God in stalinism, scientific humanism and democratic utopianism? What is it that corrupts, perverts and finally destroys the human aspirations which find expression in the secular humanist movements of our time. To this we may answer: utopianism. It has two results:

1. *Self-righteousness.* St. Paul in Romans 7 speaks of the impossibility of man doing the good he would: he intends to love his neighbor, but he does just the opposite. Love as an ideal or law is impossible of fulfilment, because it cannot be commanded to appear. What we ought to do, we cannot. Utopianism overlooks the contradiction at the core of moral idealisms. Believing in the capacity of ideals to achieve what they intend, modern humanism embarks on its program of moral and social uplift as a "holy crusade," and in so doing falls into a ruthless self-righteousness. History is full of instances of men entering upon holy moral and political crusades and turning into Grand Inquisitors. Nicolas Berdyaev has said that it was in seeking to create an inner communion of men (communism) that stalinism entered upon the path of tyranny. The belief that it is possible through political action to achieve a final harmony in society invests communism with a self-righteousness that turns the party into one of tyrants. If American youth were a little more suspicious of their own idealism, we in Asia would feel much safer, for the self-righteousness associated with the American way of life and expressed today in an anti-communist crusade may unconsciously end in an American imperialism extending throughout the world.

2. *Belief in history.* Utopianism conceives the end of history as within history itself; it looks to a future society within the historical process as the final goal towards which all history is moving. It therefore says at every turn, "History will judge," "What succeeds is right." If man knows no judgment other than that of the future, he will be concerned to create a future generation that will judge him to be right. The anxiety for success becomes a moral necessity for the man who wants to justify himself before the bar of history, and his search for power to control the future in order to vindicate his present decisions, makes him inhuman. This is the secret of much of the ruthlessness behind the revolutions of our time, whether democratic or stalinist.

Thirdly, the Commission Report frankly admits the share of the Church in the apostasy of humanism from its true Christian setting and the resulting disaster. The Report says of the Church: "Its own understanding of its message has been too restricted, too cribbed and cabined to the confines of a passing piety, to enable it to keep these ferments within the compass of that by which alone they can be judged and hallowed. . . . By its failure to measure its vision by the dimensions of the gospel, the height, the breadth and the depth of the love of God for man in the flesh of Jesus Christ, it has allowed the aspirations of humanity to serve the purpose of hell rather than the glory of God."

The Whole Gospel

THE NEED IS THEREFORE for the Church to repent of its one-sided understanding of the Gospel of Christ and to recapture it in its wholeness, as affirming everything truly human in the redemption it offers to mankind. If utopianism, with its easy path to self-righteousness and its fear of the future, is the source of corruption in modern movements of humanism, there is need for the Church to understand afresh and to proclaim to the world the Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord as the only basis for a true humanism. Two elements of the Gospel need special emphasis in this connection:

1. *The New Age beyond the end of history.* What is our theological starting point? I remember a speech by the late A. M. Verkey of Alwaye College, Travancore. "Do you realize," he asked in the course of an address to a student audience, "the tremendous implications of our declaration of faith in the physical resurrection of Christ, the revolutionary significance of the fact that the tomb was empty?" It came as something surprisingly new to me. Like many others, I had come to Christ in the traditions of pure spirituality and individual piety. I do not regret that tradition. But here was a challenge to its one-sidedness. If Christ rose in the body, the redemption He wrought was not merely of my spirit or soul, but of the whole of me, body, mind and soul, and of the whole of my relationship to nature and to men.

In the Nicene Creed, we declare our faith: "And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end." These are affirmations, not only about Christ, but also about the secular world and human his-

tory. They declare that the whole creation has been reconciled to God in Christ, that He rules, and that He will come again in glory to consummate His Kingdom. This drama of Christ's resurrection, His present rule and His second coming takes place beyond the end of history—for history ends with death—and points to a New Age, which is the goal of "the whole created world," the cosmos. It gives a final point of reference and meaning for history.

The whole world does not see this truth about itself. But a part of it does: the Church is that part of the world which knows the nature and historical destiny of the whole world. The Church lives acknowledging Christ's redemption and His rule over the secular world and human history, and lives to proclaim it among men, both by word and deed. As the World Council Commission Report says, the New Age beyond the end of history is "the final redemption of both the Church and the 'whole created world'—at once judgment, transformation and fulfilment."

2. *The power of the Cross.* There is only one place at which the self-righteousness of the good man and the holy crusader can break: at the Cross of Jesus Christ, where every man sees himself as a murderer of the Son of God, and knows himself forgiven by Him. This doctrine of justification by faith is the only ultimate basis for true community. Jesus told a story to illustrate this. Two men went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God because he was not like the publican. He divided mankind into the moral and immoral, the holy and the unholy. Jesus said that this is not the way man achieves manhood. The Pharisee returned home more self-centered and more incapable of loving his neighbor than before. But the publican beat his breast and prayed, "O Lord, have mercy upon me a miserable sinner"; and Christ said he went home a righteous man, that is, having right relations with God and his neighbor. True human community is the community of forgiven sinners. Love has ceased to be a law or an ideal; in grateful response to the forgiveness of Christ through His death, it becomes a spontaneous fact. True community has become a possibility because a new motive—gratitude—has taken the place of the old self-defeating motive of duty. It is necessary to emphasize that justification by faith leads spontaneously to good works, that the experience of forgiveness is an experience of the power of the New Age here and now, of the "this-sidedness" of the resurrection.

It is, however, not enough to emphasize the purely personal aspect of the power of sanctification, and to leave society and politics outside it. There was a time when I thought that the New Age of Christ was so much beyond history that it could be experienced in politics only as forgiveness and not as power, that political philosophy could be only a philosophy of sinful necessities where the Cross was relevant only as forgiveness to the politician, and not as qualifying politics, political parties, techniques and institutions as such. That is to say, the power of the Cross was considered as "beyond politics." No doubt, when the depth of sin in the collective life of man is realized, it is natural to speak of "moral man and immoral society." But certain questions remained with me: Can Christ only judge politics? Can He not also in some measure redeem it here and now? Cannot forgiveness be realized as power in the structures of the collective and institutional life of man in society? Cer-

tainly there will be a gulf between a politics of justice and the life of charity until Christ comes, and there may be times when politics becomes so terribly perverted that the tension between the two is extremely tragic. But I believe that it is possible for politics itself to be redeemed from its extreme perversions and be made more or less human, if it recognizes and receives into itself the power of the Gospel. This emphasis on the redemption of the secular collective life of man through the power of the Cross is lacking in the World Council Commission Report.

Redefinition of Secular Humanism

THE COMMISSION, after presenting its theological affirmations and its diagnosis of the reason for the failure of pagan humanism, goes on to consider the positive Christian task in this situation. At this point, however, one gets the feeling that the ultimate Christian hope is presented as a substitute for or an alternative to the provisional human hopes and aspirations expressed in the secular humanist utopias of our time. It is certainly not that. Christianity is not an alternative for social revolution, or science, or democracy, and we certainly need movements and ideologies to affirm the values of social, political and economic justice, and of rational scientific pursuits, and to build up liberal secular democratic states based on the fundamental rights of the human person. There is an attempt to run away from such movements and ideologies in the Commission's Report. This is understandable in Europe which has come to the end of the Renaissance and the Reformation. But in other parts of the world, such as Asia, we are only at the beginning of the Renaissance. Here socialism, nationalism and democracy denote forces that speak to man of liberation. In such situations the Christian task is not to fight shy of humanist ideologies and movements, but to present the faith, love and hope of the Gospel of Christ as the power which can redeem them from their "most terrible perversion" and re-establish them in such a way that they do not betray, but realize, their true human ends. Our opposition to pagan nationalism is not primarily because it rebels against Christ, but because in so rebelling it betrays the values it seeks to achieve for man. We present Christ as the basis on which nationalism can be redefined and a truly national movement can take shape. So also with democracy. The Bangkok conference of East Asian church leaders said that democracy was weak and tended to break down in Asia because it was separated from its Christian roots, and that the Christian task was to "redefine, revitalize and reinforce" the democratic forces and values in the light of the Christian faith, so that they may endure. Bangkok also felt that "a true social democratic" revolution might be the answer to stalinism. All this may sound irrelevant to Europe, but it is not necessarily so to Asia. And the only plea one can make in this connection to the World Council Commission is that it not be guided entirely by the Continental European situation in its formulation of the positive Christian tasks *vis-à-vis* stalinism, scientific humanism and democratic utopianism. In Asia at least, Christians certainly have a more positive task in relation to the forces and ideologies of socialism, science and democracy. And only if Christians are prepared to enter into the task of redefinition of the dynamic, modern, ideological and political

movements of our time, can the relevance of the Gospel be made clear to modern pagans, who deify man and use his hopes to enhance their own self-righteousness and to show forth their mastery over their own destiny. Christians, called as Christians to fight for socialism, science and democracy, are the people in Asia who will best witness to the power of Christ to redeem the "multitude of hopes for man in his temporal history and temporal concerns." *Ecce homo* will be intelligible only in the context of such a Christian witness in the world.

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