

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 10

Volume 10 • Number 4 • October 1986

**Evangelical
Review of
Theology** p. 295

Wholeness and Fragmentation: The Gospel and Repression

Michael Nazir-Ali

Printed with permission

The creation narratives speak of man as having been created in the image of God and as having been invested with the exercise of vice-regency over the rest of creation on God's behalf.¹ This view of man implies that man has a certain dignity and a certain freedom *vis à vis* the rest of creation. The idea that man is a free, responsible being is characteristic of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Islam too, claiming to stand within this broad tradition, affirms the vice-regal nature of man and regards man as a trustee for the rest of creation.² Freedom then is a necessary aspect of the whole man as God created him.

It is, however, equally true that servitude, oppression, exploitation, in short the end of freedom, is a necessary consequence of man's fall from grace. Man's freedom is never regarded as absolute in the Scriptures, it is always subject to God and to his sovereign Law, but fallen man puts himself in God's place and attempts to exercise sovereignty over his fellow man—with the important difference that man's usurpation is characterized by a notable lack of integrity and justice, the very qualities which characterize divine sovereignty. *Sedāqāh* in the Old Testament (N.T.=dikaiosunē) as the righteousness of God affirms, over against numerous pagan beliefs, God's integrity in the act of creation as well as his moral relation with man. God in the Bible is contrasted with the 'godlings' of the nations who have made man for sport and cannot be expected to be just in their dealings with him.

Not only, however, is God just in his dealings with man but he requires man to be just in his dealings with his fellow human beings. It is true that both the Old and New Testaments speak of God justifying the sinner on the basis of faith but this justification, if it is not to be allowed to become mere legal fiction, must result in the restoration of justice in relations between man and man.³ It is characteristic of natural man that such justice is not to be found in his relations with his fellow human beings. The absence of this justice is seen not only in inter-personal relationships but also in social structures which fallen man has created for himself. We can say, therefore, that there is a total lack of justice in the way tyrants throughout the course of history have dealt with the subjects they have tyrannized. This continues today p. 336 where personal power is expressed in oppressive and exploitative ways. On closer examination, however, it will be seen that such oppressive power exercised by an individual is often (if not always) supported by unjust socio-economic systems. In Asia, for example, personal dictatorships are nearly always maintained by feudal-military axes which prefer them to more popular regimes, which may come to depend upon the people for their power! There is usually a parasitical relationship here: the dictator, in his turn, enriches and thus makes powerful the axis which keeps him (sometimes her) in power. Social structures are not oppressive only when they support and are supported by a personal dictatorship. Their very structuring

¹ [Gen. 1:26-30, 2:28-34](#).

² Q2.30, 33.72.

³ [Gen. 15:6](#), [Rom. 4:3](#), [Gal. 3:6](#), cf. [Rom. 6:15-19](#), [Gal. 5:13-15](#), [Jas. 2:28ff](#).

may be oppressive in character and may reflect the division between the powerful and the powerless, the exploiters and the exploited. The caste system in India is an obvious example of a social structure which has been developed to perpetuate the power-relations which exist between victor and vanquished. Military superiority has been transformed by this feat of social engineering into socio-economic hegemony. Again, *Apartheid* is nothing but a microcosm of the North-South divide which places power and economic muscle with one group of nations. It is indisputable that apartheid could not have survived without the military, economic and technological backing of 'the North'. Coming to the North-South question itself, the immorality of conventional capitalist economics is seen in its deification of the demand-supply principle. This, of course, is having disastrous consequences for the social fabric of Northern countries, but its effects on the emerging economies of Asia, Africa and Latin America catastrophic. The North creates demand and then controls it. power of large trans-national firms is such that they can virtually dictate the price of commodities produced by the South. A permanent relationship of dependence is created and sustained. There is no morality in the market-place and the weak are continually being made weaker. The North, moreover, finds a pliant market for its goods in the South which is again made dependent upon them by a complex process which involves offering a developing country 'soft term loans' (usually and outrageously called aid!), 'industrialization', the corruption of its ruling elite, and the creation of demand for totally unnecessary goods. It is true, of course, that there is much necessary transfer of technology from the North to the South, but this is not what causes chronic indebtedness. Prestigious projects, unnecessary and inappropriate 'development', corruption and the lack of an appropriate technology cause the syndrome of dependence. It needs to be said also that the North often prevents, by very dubious methods indeed, [p.337](#) the emergence of appropriate technology in the South. The recent difficulties experienced by the emerging pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh are a case in point.

The emergence of ideology as a means of manipulating power is a comparatively recent development in that most ideological states have come into being only in the last hundred years or so. Ideologies, whether fascist or socialist, have a populist appeal but in fact vest power in a ruling elite consisting of an intellectual vanguard, political bureaucrats and the armed forces. The perpetuation of the ideology, on which the existence of a state is alleged to depend, also results in the perpetuation of the power of the party and, more particularly, of those who have power within the party. The ordinary citizen, on whose behalf the ideology has been promoted, is more and more marginalized and, if he seeks change, oppressed. Heterodoxy becomes the main evil in society and is to be rooted out at all costs but real social evils such as corruption, misuse of power, or inefficiency in bureaucratized and centralized industry are ignored.

In this second half of the twentieth century we are witnessing an even newer phenomenon—the emergence of ideological states based on religious fundamentalism. The Wahhābi revolution in Saudi Arabia created an ideological state there in the last century. This state was and is based on a rigor st interpretation of Islam as given in the two primary sources of that religion: The Qurān and the Sunhah, or practice of the prophet of Islam. Now, however, we find that there are other Muslim fundamentalist states whose fundamentalism has a somewhat different basis. Importance might be given, for instance, to an 'apostolic succession' of authoritative figures, or to the cultural and geographical homogeneity of a people as much as to the primary sources of religion.⁴ Religious fundamentalism (of all kinds) exploits the innate conservatism of people. Power, however, is ultimately wielded by a religious establishment who claim to have a monopoly

⁴ See the present writer's: *Islam: A Christian perspective*, Paternoster 1983, pp. 95ff., and 124ff.

in the interpretation and application of the Sacred tradition. Power is sometimes gained with the help of the masses, who see in religious fundamentalism a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism, but it is maintained by an alliance of the clergy, the armed forces, the bureaucracy and elite armed guards who owe loyalty to the clergy. In global geopolitical terms, such regimes are tolerated and even supported to maintain alleged balances of power. In the western democracies too religious fundamentalism can be a powerful political force and because of its appeal to the masses, it can influence state p. 338 policy in important respects. One important effect of the rise of fundamentalism as a state ideology is the suppression of religious minorities. Just as political fundamentalist ideology forbids political dissent, so religious fundamentalist ideology discourages religious dissent. (It is also true that political fundamentalist ideology often discourages religious belief as it can be an alternative source for the ordering of life and so is regarded as a danger to the state ideology. On the other hand, religious fundamentalism frequently suppresses political dissent, as its custodians regard themselves as possessors of a divinely revealed ideology to which there can be no alternative.) In recent years there have been serious cases of the violation of the human rights of minority groups by fundamentalist regimes. The religious beliefs of such groups have been vilified, their places of worship seized or demolished, and many have been driven out of their homes or put in prison. These are surely matters of concern to all who love justice and tolerance? An element of repression which must concern the sensitive Christian is the particular mentality it creates in those who are repressed. Systematic economic exploitation, for example, creates a mentality where mistrust and suspicion become the basis for social relationships. This ultimately results in social fragmentation and psychological alienation. Again, political repression, apart from creating fear and suspicion of political institutions, finally weakens such institutions and may even cause their demise. Other symptoms of a repressed mentality can be outward sycophancy accompanied by inner hostility. This has very adverse effects on the integration of personality and also results in what has been called 'communal schizophrenia'.⁵

What does the Gospel's offer of wholeness mean in a context of repression? Before we address the question, it would perhaps be appropriate to acknowledge that the invitation of the Gospel to repentance and new life has been presented by Christians and Churches with a great deal of power, influence and money. The repressed have, therefore, tended to see the Church as one more institution seeking to exploit them. In some areas, such as Latin America, the Church has wielded considerable political and financial influence and is seen as an oppressive institution even by its own theologians! In Asia the situation is somewhat different—here a generally poor Church regards its leaders with mistrust as they are suspected (sometimes justifiably) of exploiting the poverty of their p. 339 constituency for their own enrichment. The lesson to be learned from this is, of course, that the most effective commendation of the Gospel comes from those who are powerless in worldly terms but have found the new life in Jesus Christ to be a profound source of power for living and loving. The coming into existence of base ecclesial communities in many parts of the world, numerous ministries of identification with and care for the poor and the emergence of theologies which take the question of justice seriously are all signs that such a commendation of the Gospel is taking place at least in some contexts. The struggle to achieve and to maintain power in the Church, is, however, one of the greatest

⁵ I owe the term to the Rev. Robert Wilkes. See further an old but important work on the subject: J. C. Heinrich: 'The Psychology of a Suppressed People', London 1937.

stumbling blocks to an effective proclamation of the Gospel to the poor.⁶ We need to reiterate the vital link between God's justice and the justification of the sinner. This must be seen not simply as a royal pardon, as a reversal to some kind of *tabula rasa*, but as the gradual (but nevertheless real) creation of righteousness in the justified sinner. The justification of the sinner, his being accounted righteous, must result in his being made just, and this in turn should result in an effort to establish justice in the Christian's social, political and economic environment.⁷

As far as the Christian's duty to witness *for* justice and *against* injustice is concerned, certain Gospel principles need to be kept in mind: First, a Christian is forbidden to employ violent means to safeguard his *own* rights.⁸ Second, he is to obey secular authority only 'insofar as the Law of Christ allows'. In other words, where secular authority attempts to usurp God's place or to violate his law, obedience is not mandatory. The refusal of the early Christians to ascribe divine titles to Caesar or to sacrifice to the gods are an example of this kind of godly disobedience. The Christian (or a group of Christians) cannot, therefore, struggle for their own rights, but they may rightly struggle for the rights of other (Christian and non-Christian) oppressed groups. The Christian, in keeping with the whole of prophetic and dominical tradition, may witness for justice in a situation where there is oppression and exploitation.⁹ Identification and an expression of solidarity with the oppressed is an area of Christian concern which has attracted considerable attention in recent years. There are numerous Christian communities throughout the third p. 340 world whose main aim is to live with the poor, experience their suffering with them and offer the Gospel to the poor in word and deed. Such communities are transforming the Church's understanding of her own mission and also compelling a cynical world to take the Church more seriously. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation provides a theological basis for the Church's involvement with the poor in this way.¹⁰

It is necessary to say at this point that the Christian will affirm and will stand with all those who seek justice and truth. He will acknowledge as 'signs of the Kingdom' all efforts to establish justice and to do away with exploitation and greed. He will endeavour to work with all men of good will, whatever their belief or lack of belief, who seek to promote a more just and humane world.¹¹

Apart from social action, however, there is another dimension of the Gospel's offer of wholeness to humanity and that is *Spiritual Healing*. Such healing is not to be confused with 'Faith Healing' whatever that might mean. Those Christians who take spiritual healing seriously will declare that such healing is concerned with the whole person and that true healing should not be merely physical but should bring wholeness to all areas of the person's life. It should bring him integration of personality, mental stability, and experience of salvation along with physical healing. An area that is much emphasized these days is the healing of relationships. Christians as a community should show marks of restoration and wholeness in their communal life. This has ever been a powerful witness to the world.

⁶ J. C. England: *Living Theology in Asia* SCM London 1981. V. Samuel & C. Sugden (eds.); *Sharing Jesus Christ in the Two Thirds World*, Bangalore 1983. K. Y. Bock (ed.): *Minjung Theology*, Singapore CCA 1981.

⁷ Rom. ch. 8, [Phil. 2:12-13](#).

⁸ [Matt. 5:38ff](#)

⁹ Amos, [Matt. 23](#), [25](#).

¹⁰ See for example, Leon Howell: *People are the Subject*, CWME-WCC Geneva 1980.

¹¹ See further: *Your Kingdom come*, CWME-WCC Geneva 1980.

One of the most exciting developments in theology in recent years has been the recovery of the biblical teaching that God suffers with and for us, i.e. He is compassionate in the strict sense. God's suffering is not simply compassionate, however—it is also redemptive. Divine involvement with human suffering has a purpose and that purpose is the elimination of suffering. God comes to us in our situation to save us from our predicament.¹² The Church, in continuing the *missio Dei*, is also called to suffer. Certainly, such suffering refines Christian character but it should also be a means for the redemption of the world.¹³ Identification with the oppressed is not enough—there must be such a proclamation of the Kingdom and its values, such a humble service and such a commitment to Gospel truth that the poor are saved in every sense of the word: saved not only from outside oppression and exploitation but saved from their own ignorance, mentality, and brokenness. In other words saved from their own sin.

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali is a Bishop of Lahore Diocese, Pakistan. p. 342

An Evangelical Perspective of Roman Catholicism

(The Executive Committee of the Theological Commission of WEF decided to establish a task force on Roman Catholicism in 1980. The decision was recorded in the minute that follows: 'In the light of the growing apprehension among the evangelicals in several parts of the world concerning the relationships with Roman Catholics at different levels, the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship has appointed a special Task Force to study afresh different aspects of Roman Catholic theology and practice as they relate to biblical principles and the evangelical community. These, in turn, will be examined as to their traditional content and the particular present day expressions with a view to understand them, evaluate our own position, and arrive at adequate conclusions.' The study was originally intended to cover basic doctrinal issues: soteriology, bibliology and authority, Mariology, natural theology, sacraments and grace, ecclesiology; and practical issues: baptism, conversion of practising Roman Catholics, ecumenism and the place of Pope John Paul II. Subsequently, the scope was modified to include the following: Relation to other Churches, Religious liberty, Mariology, Authority of the Church, Papacy and Infallibility, Modernism/Theological Liberalism, Justification by faith, Sacramentalism and the Eucharist, and the Mission of the Church.

The following procedure was adopted to carry out the above mandate: 1. Draft a brief statement indicating the areas where the study should begin; 2. Erect a Task Force of 13 persons; 3. Appoint a Drafting Committee of 6 persons; 4. Solicit comments from the Members of the Theological Commission; 5. Solicit initial written statements from the Task Force members; 6. the Drafting Committee to meet two full days to consider the responses; 7. Send the revised Draft to Task Force and Theological Commission members for further

¹² K. Kitamori: *Theology of the Pain of God*, Richmond Va. 1965. J. Moltmann: *The Crucified God*, London 1974.

¹³ [Matt. 5:11](#), [10:16ff.](#), [20:23](#). [John 21:18ff.](#), cf. [2 Cor. 4:7-12](#).