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Christian Responsibility in Indian Society

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The changing character of Indian society compels Christians to think about the nature of their responsibility in the social context that has developed since 1947. This is especially necessary as there is no historical parallel to the situation, nor is there any fund of Christian moral experience on which to draw. Much has to be done from the beginning, and this means from a Biblical understanding of our position until we work out to the actual situations in which we must decide what to do. Whatever the general attitude may be toward the government, the Christian has to form his relation to society as a whole in a way which will correspond to the faith which sustains and directs his life. This is possible as he studies continually the nature of his responsibility as a Christian to national society.

Responsibility is a two-way traffic. There is a relation that works both from the individual or the group out to the whole, and from the organized whole back to the units of which it is composed. This movement to be wholesome and free can never be allowed to deteriorate into a one-way traffic of mere demand, an insistence upon rights, or simply an expectation of what will be beneficial to the individual or group concerned. With all such movement there is a return in which the same individual or group accepts just demands upon itself in the interest of the people as a whole. Without this two-way traffic there can be no permanently free, just and ordered society. Either tyranny or anarchy will result.

An Introduction

The State, as the organized form of national society, exists primarily to provide justice, order and the means of welfare of all its citizens. Its main concern must be to fulfil the requirements of justice in the sections of society which constitute it and give it authority. Since Christians make up one of the major sections of national society they are especially responsible for the healthy functioning of the State. That responsibility has a very special character in view of the nature of the Christian faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and the life which flows from this faith. While the Christian recognizes a general responsible position as a citizen, he must also acknowledge that the rights and duties of citizens in general do not entirely define what he as a Christian citizen may be expected to do. Religious faith defines religious life in society. Not only does the Christian acknowledge a general accountability to the divine source of his life, as should every adherent of a living religion,

but he confesses quite openly that his place in national and community life is of a special kind due to his allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. It is what Jesus Christ is that tells him what he should be in every situation, and not just what he recognizes as the claims of a general human ethic upon him. While the State, then, must provide a just order of welfare for all its citizens, the Christian should help the State determine what that just order is, and what he will contribute to it. The expectation of Christian responsibility according to what he knows in Jesus Christ as Lord will not be satisfied with justice alone, but must go on to ask what it is that the love of Christ means for him in society.

Christian love in relation to society, as well as to the individual and within the life of the Christian Church, must be distinguished from a general human love which all recognize. This is not because Christians as such have any specially different kind of benevolence or concern for people as a whole, for as a matter of fact many non-Christians possess such benevolence and compassion to a far higher degree than many Christians. The love which we consider as Christian is not the love of man, but the love of Christ. This makes it a uniquely dynamic force wherever it is exerted. It is not simply the extension of human love, but the redemption of that love, broken and contradicted by human sin. There is a perversion of human love that confounds society as it does the individual also, who is subject to it. The love of Christ is the love of God at work among men, communicated by those who have come by faith into the way of the forgiveness of sins. 'In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.' (I John 4:9 ff.) Here the moral obligation is a part of the spiritual salvation from what impedes and distorts human love, giving it its true force and quality.

Christian responsibility has a particular concern for the nature of the love which supports and informs true justice, creating for it possibilities beyond any of its legal formulations. For any religion has some distinctive quality of life it inspires: a compassion, benevolence, harmlessness, kindness or good will which is essentially a part of its conception of life. So it will have its own form of responsibility in the life of society as a whole. While acknowledging the particular contributions which the different forms of religious life make in national society, the Christian must still look to the source of that love which he knows is given and found in Jesus Christ.

In thinking of the particular responsibility of the State for justice, it is necessary to make a distinction. We must discern the extent to which the claims of justice that are upon all citizens generally, and the claims of love according to the Gospel that are upon Christian citizens in particular, have a common area in social policy and action. Some will see the areas of justice and love as practically identical; others will find them to be divergent by the fact that such love as Jesus required can have no real fulfilment within any form of historical society. But in both cases it will be agreed there are common areas of action for the justice of the State and the love of the Christian person, and that it

must be our continual concern to work these out so that the two-way traffic of responsibility may be beneficial both to the State and to the Christian community. Obviously the Christian must hold the view that all people in the nation are responsible for seeking the ends of justice amid competing claims, while he expects the obedience of Christian love only from those who accept the Gospel. Christians must acknowledge an especially forceful claim upon them through the love of Christ. This is not a legal requirement, though Jesus did call it a command. Rather it is a personal claim which looks upon every human situation as having no complete precedent, and therefore no exact law or definition to guide in what should be done. Love in this sense is active, out-reaching, seeking for the welfare of others, and willing to sacrifice its own interests and rights for the good of others. This love will never be content with a legal statement of the maximum or minimum claims of justice, but will also seek to expand the boundaries of social need which come within the scope of the law. This can happen as some formerly undisclosed area of human need comes to light through Jesus Christ the Lord of life. Justice growing through love is given a clear historical purpose, and yet is saved from the idealistic peril of becoming utopian.

The Secular State

The secularism of the Indian State means not only its religious neutrality but its exercise of justice in regard to the various claims upon it. We may say that in view of the religious plurality of Indian society the Secular State is the only really responsible form of government. This does not mean that the State is irreligious, although a Secular State can certainly become so. It merely means that the State does not commit itself to any one religious view, or to an anti-religious position. In the interest of the religious life of the people the secularization of the State must be limited to its functions of maintaining a just and pacific order; and, equally, it is in the interest of any religion within the State that the tendencies to a theocratic or communal order at all times be checked. In this social and political context the Christian must look on the State as a divine order of society with a purpose in history. The Apostle Paul called the non-Christian ruler 'the minister of God' and urged obedience to the demands of the State as a matter of Christian conscience (cf. Rom. 13). This is at least an illustration of the fact that there can be at the same time a secular and a religious form or view of the State. From the Christian point of view a distinction must be made between the God-given nature and purpose of the State and its secular functions in the religious and social pluralism of Indian life. This has a very practical bearing upon the present concern of the governments in some of the States for the conduct and welfare of religious institutions, and how far the law can go in attempting to regulate the affairs of these institutions to make them contribute to a healthy social morality. Christians have here a theological task to give guidance in the practical issue. While recognizing the functions of the Secular State in maintaining public order and morality, a Christian view will also maintain Christian institutions accountable to God in such a way as to make them not only honest in their management but loving in their social purposes.

The various groups, sections, communities and classes of Indian society, which seek to gain recognition for their respective demands upon the government, give a special complexity to the problem of justice in concrete affairs. For one thing, it is important that the secular character of the State be maintained if justice is to be secured among these sometimes competing claims. It may be best here to think of securing justice in terms of equality. The equality that is in mind when national leaders refer to a classless society has to mean an equal access to the resources of the nation and an equal opportunity for security and development by means of them. This kind of justice requires a continual inner development of the functions of government so as to provide the opportunity deserved by one group or another, but it never should be thought of as a static balance in which some kind of mathematical equality is to be achieved. The secular conception of the State is just such a progressive functioning of society as will provide those opportunities that are the just expectation of individuals and groups. But it cannot be expected that this is automatically assured by a democratic form of government, although in such government there is the best ground for assurance. The State itself has to be responsive to the needs of its people or it will be overcome by inner tensions.

There are two particular threats to a functional equality in the Secular State for which Christians ought to have a special concern. The first is communalism. It is possible for a religious group so to assert itself that it determines in its own interest not only concrete decisions of the State, but the nature and form of the State itself, making it conform to some restricted communal purpose. In this event a communal government would take the place of the secular one. The rights of a religious or social group are not to be measured by the number of its adherents, or its representation in the legislature, but by its need for development to a place of responsible contribution to national life. For this reason the Christian community has to support the secular character of the State, because it best assures the rights of minorities, including Christians themselves, and because it offers the greatest means for Christian love to work in society. As against communalism the Secular State is essential to the operation of a dynamic justice increasingly moulding all sections of the nation into a working community which considers the needs of all, including the under-privileged, as of equal and impartial importance.

The real nature of communalism is sometimes disguised by attempts to show concern for social justice apart from special religious aims. In resisting attempts to establish a religious form of the State, e.g. 'Hindudom', Christians have also to ask in what way they can work for Christian purposes to take form in national life, or how the State can be expected to be responsive to special Christian claims upon it. In what sense, then, can we pray and hope for Christ's lordship in the nation? How can Christians work to see that His lordship is made known to all? These are questions that have to be answered in a way that will avoid suspicion of proselytism and communalism among us, and yet will leave us faithful to the Lord who sends us to be witnesses of Him to all men. We may not expect to have a Christian State, but we must look toward gaining recognition of those forms of political

organization and action that will be compatible with the concrete expression in society of the faith in Christ as Lord of men.

The other particular threat to the functional equality which the Secular State should secure for its people is from the side of communism. If communalism seeks to disturb justice by reducing the chances of a balance of interests among social and religious groups, communism in another way disturbs justice by making an excessive emphasis upon the necessity of equality in society. When communism attempts to achieve an equalitarian society it does this by denying the only possible form of equality among living men, for it eliminates what it considers to be intractable elements, either by increasing the accumulation of political prisoners or by liquidating them. What communism attempts for its ideal of freedom, ends in a totalitarianism which not only represses the tensions within society but destroys the freedom within the minds and spirits of men. The result is a new form of tension that widens its national and international areas, and deepens man's distrust of himself. Communism would destroy the secularism of the State by enforcing a total encroachment upon all life according to its own faith and interpretation. This would result in a monster State that could allow no free opposition and no adverse opinion as to its legitimate rights.

The Secular State is subject to its own peculiar evils, when those in power exercise it for their individual or class advantage, making democracy a mockery. The answer to these evils is to be found in the constant vigilance and activity of all groups which must exhibit in themselves the moral standards they expect in public life. The religious contribution comes from an awareness of the divine function of the State as ordained of God, and therefore subject to those judgments of God which become evident in any society. A prophetic religion seeks to make it responsive to the purpose of God by a continual enlightenment. That enlightenment can have a Christian source only through those who know that the function of the State is not indestructible, and that its actions are not beyond the power of a love that works in freedom.

Christian Activity

Christian educational and social institutions, in contributing significantly to the growth of modern democracy, have helped to make possible the establishment of the Secular State. This contribution is now diminishing in quantity for two reasons. One is the increase in number of other than Christian institutions which have more recently been established, thus decreasing the ratio of those in national life who are influenced by Christian teaching and example through institutions. The other reason is that the government is more and more assuming control of the means of education and the social services, either by complete management or by claiming a greater influence in their internal affairs. Christian institutions ought therefore to consider how they can more dynamically influence the mind of the nation in order to continue their distinctive contribution. This means that the numerical ratio of decrease has to be offset by a qualitative increase in responsible service. The secular functions of the State will have to be maintained in this process if Christian service is actively to be continued. Yet it is possible for the State, in continuing its concern for the management of public institutions,

to destroy the freedom which has been one of their most valuable contributions to the nation as well as to the Christian community. In resisting the depreciation of this institutional freedom, therefore, Christians can make a contribution to the nation, but they must place limits on their own religious liberty so as not to encroach upon that of non-Christians who seek the benefits of their service.

The Christian community contributes to the nation, not only through its service, but when it is worshipping God and propagating the Gospel. The worship of the Church expresses man's love of God, and at the same time inspires his love of neighbour. One way of showing this love of others is by proclaiming that Christ loves all men, individually and without distinction. While the right to propagate religion is written into the Constitution this does not relieve Christians, who have a special interest in the provision, from the necessity of constant vigilance that their activities do not become degraded into proselytism. We ought always to insist upon the Christian understanding of conversion as the free right of the individual to change from one religious faith to another. An exact legal definition of conversion will never be satisfactory, but it will be open to the State to take action against proselytizing activities wherever they may be found. The responsible Christian should not make it necessary for the State to adopt a legal course of action, but should himself seek for such an expression of the love of Christ as will avoid the necessity. It belongs to the Church as one of its most important contributions to society to see that the insistence upon the right of propagation of religious faith does not disguise a proselytizing motive. The Church should instruct and guide its members in ways and attitudes of evangelism which will convey to all sincerely interested persons the essentially spiritual purpose of this activity. This can only be done as the Church itself is possessed by the love of Christ so that its regard for people will not be counted numerically, but by selfless service.

Nationalism and the Church

Before 1947 nationalism provided the stimulus for the revival of religion and culture, and in turn adopted their forms of expression. It was engaged in the struggle for freedom both from foreign political and economic control, and from the dominating influence upon India's cultural life by the West. The attainment of the first freedom has opened the way for an added concentration upon the second. The national spirit seeks for a conquest of alien cultural institutions that seem out of harmony with some of the revived values of ancient thought and life. Since Hinduism and Buddhism are inextricably related to these values in both their social and religious forms, these historic religions occupy a new position of importance for the nation. This is not simply due to the situation within India. For the force of nationalism, that until 1947 was directed to the internal struggle for freedom, has now turned to the international sphere where the dominating question is India's relation to the world power struggle. The success of the policy of neutrality has given strength to the cultural revival as a force in international affairs, where reference to India's spiritual heritage has a special appeal. The changing form of nationalism has therefore a particular bearing upon

the Church in India in its ecumenical character, and in its responsibility for national, religious and cultural development.

The Buddhist and Hindu revivals show that Christianity is not alone as a missionary religion in India. One of the influences of the Christian missionary movement has been to help in the awakening of men and women to a new social awareness, and this was particularly effective because of the decadence of these other religions. By becoming a vehicle of nationalism, Hinduism regained much that had been lost, as when Gandhiji launched his Harijan reform movement. Now the new nationalism shows that the social reformation is not the last frontier of Hindu revival, since the values of ancient religion take on a new significance for the world today. The re-appearance of Buddhism in India in a nationalist guise gives added impetus to the cultural revival which indirectly, at least, may offset some of the Christian impact upon the nation. It is apparent both from the Biblical and traditional character of Christianity as a missionary religion that its social contribution is in direct ratio to its missionary effectiveness. A static and introverted Church cannot become a constructive force in national affairs, rather it may itself become a prey to the aggressiveness of non-Christian religions. One of the urgent tasks before the Church in India is to reach an understanding of the religious position, and to come to grips with the resurgence of non-Christian religions. To do so in a constructive way will mean to accept the challenge, not in a spirit of conflict, but by a new evaluation of its own heritage in the light of its present national position, and through a fresh realization of that spiritual power of the Holy Spirit that witnesses in historical situations through obedient men and women.

The Church in India is placed under a peculiar tension, because of the growing challenge of the non-Christian revival, and because of its relationship with Churches in other lands that continue their missionary obligation in India. While partnership is the ideal, in actuality we must still reckon with large-scale dependence upon missionary finance and personnel. The relationship in itself is not unwholesome, rather it embodies a vital Christian principle. But we have to contend with the fact that the indigenous expression of Christian thought and life, which has been desired for so long, has made little advance since political independence. A certain kind of imitative expression is not wholesome, although often the emphasis of the proponents of indigenous Christianity, as well as of the critics, has fastened on it. True indigeneity is a natural process of the Church living in its environment by the power of the Spirit. If the Church is to make its contribution to the nation as a living institution it must find its life in obedience to the Spirit within the community of Christ. Here freedom and dependence are found, and the Holy Spirit is revealed as the source of responsible witness in action.