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Contemporary Forms of Society in the Light of the Christian Faith¹

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SCOPE OF THE PAPER

The aim or interest of the paper is not to study the forms of society as such but the anthropological assumptions back of these forms or structures. Even the anthropological questions will be raised from a theological standpoint and will be stated in the light of the Christian faith. The study will be just an outline forming a basis for discussion.

The fundamental forms of social structure that will be mentioned are Communism, Democracy, and Sarvodaya ; and back of all these is what is called Secularism. These forms of society or government do not consider it necessary to believe in God or in any supernatural existence. They are essentially anthropocentric and this-worldly.

SECULARISM

An attitude of secularism and relativism has invaded all areas of life in Church and Society. The fear of God or the idea of a hereafter has no reality to the secularist world. The creed of a secularist man is :

- '(1) Nothing can be believed unless it can be proved scientifically.
- (2) Human beings must rely wholly upon themselves and on one another in achieving maturity and fullness of life.
- (3) Science has accomplished so much already that we can expect it to help us solve all problems eventually.'

It is only proper that the Christian theologian shall take up this challenge and face it boldly but honestly. How does or should he interpret God to the secularist mind? How should he interpret man to him? What is the secularist understanding of *man*?

¹ A paper read at the Indian Christian Theological Conference held in Madras.

COMMUNISM

From the Communist interpretation of historical development there follow certain inevitable conclusions. One class must fight against another class—*class conflict*. 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles . . . Our epoch, the epoch of the *bourgeoisie*, possesses, however, this distinctive feature: it has simplified the class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps into two great classes directly facing each other—*bourgeoisie* and proletariat' (Marx and Engels: Manifesto of the Communist Party, 31, 32; quoted in *Communism and Christianity*, 20, 21). There should be *revolution*, and without a clash of arms there will be no redemption for the proletariat. Constitutional reforms and parliamentary democracy are only intended to avoid giving up power and profit and are hypocritical. Religion, law, and morality rationalize the inhuman activities of the capitalists and endeavour to dull and impede the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. The Communist accordingly adopts a *relativist attitude to morals*. Any activity that promotes the cause of the proletariat movement is to be executed even at the breach of what is ordinarily called law or morality—a good Hegelian principle of part yielding to the whole! Once the revolution succeeds and the proletariat is in power, they should ruthlessly persist the policy, using whatever means—violent or otherwise—of disorganizing and overthrowing the existing order of society culminating in the rise of a *Classless Society*. The Communist not only is relativistic in his attitude to morals and law, but he is avowedly atheistic. 'Religion is the sign of a heavy-laden creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium of the people*. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a prerequisite for the attainment of real happiness by the people . . . Thus the criticism of heaven is transformed into a criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into a criticism of law, the criticism of theology into a criticism of politics' (quoted in *Communism and Christianity*, 30).

'The inner contradiction of Marxism lies in its effort to create a society with human values when its whole philosophy gives a purely functional interpretation of man' (*Ibid.*, 65), 'But in its view of man's stature, it is forced to deny the depth of spirit in the structure of human personality. It is consequently unable to understand the real character of human evil' (Niebuhr: *Nature and Destiny*, I, quoted in *Communism and Christianity*, 65-66). Communism views man as self-sufficient and Christian faith understands him as sinner. Because it lacks a sense of sin, it reckons its tyranny as righteousness unto itself.

DEMOCRACY

Some people derive democracy from the principles of Christianity. 'Dr. G. P. Gooch points out that modern democracy

“ was the child of the Reformation, which enunciated two principles ; the rightful duty of free enquiry, which led straight from theological criticism to political criticism, and so to liberty, and the priesthood of believers, which led to equality ” (quoted in *Communism and Christianity*, 77). Probably on this account some identify Christianity and democracy. However, as Dr. Loew says : ‘ The relations between Christianity and democracy actually have been complicated rather than simple, and more often indirect than direct. Historians still are battling over the question whether or not the rise of democracy was dependent on Christianity and the truth seems to be that our free society developed through the interaction of both Christian and non-Christian forces ’ (*Modern Rivals to Christian Faith*, 31). All *these* point to this : Democracy stands for freedom of thought, expression and enterprise ; for equality and fraternity in social and economic living. Christian faith, as seen above, vouches for these and has preached and to some extent practised them in the Church ; therefore Christianity is held to be the basis, and, in some cases the content, of democracy.

However, the Christian view of freedom and equality is peculiar. All are equal in the sense that God created them in His *image*, that men perverted God’s image and went according to their own way *estranged* from God’s, and that they all are objects of God’s grace. They are free in the sense that they can act according to their own way even opposing God’s, but can do so only within the determining might and power of God. ‘ Both capitalism and communism are incapable of ridding themselves of tyranny so long as their view of man is one which deprives him of his true status as a child of God ’ (*Communism and Christianity*, 77). The observations of a Hindu writer are worth quoting in this connection. ‘ Nothing can be more mischievous and more opposed to the true moral and social progress of humanity than the modern creed of democracy that any one man is as good as any other in regard to the formation of a judgement on matter of public and social welfare. Nor is it true that in all matters the modern States—even the most democratic of them—act up, in practice, to that ideal’ . . . ‘ Nothing can be more absurd than to suppose that in actual practice, the citizens voting at elections in modern States are equally *capable* of judging of the merits of the persons and policies which attain to prominence in public affairs from time to time ’ (K. Sundararama : *Dharma and Life*, Part I, 103). Over against this assertion consider the proverb and scriptural saying, namely ‘ there is truth in the mouth of four people ’ ; ‘ where there are two or three gathered in my name, there I am in their midst ’.

There is a tension in the democratic form of social order corresponding to that in human nature. There is always room for criticism and opposition in parliamentary form of democracy ; where this is suppressed and its need denied, it is autocracy and absolutism. This is true on the family level and also on the State level. The chief mark of the Biblical religion is precisely this

way of providing a constant critique to the social and political policies of Israel, and this tradition has been rendered more revolutionary and lasting by the teaching and work of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, which the Church has inherited. The reformers only recaptured and rediscovered this aspect of the expression of Christian faith. This is also the reason why democracy and Christian faith look alike ; and I believe, that is why, among other reasons, we should commit ourselves, existentially speaking, to democracy rather than to any other form of society or government as things now stand. Recognition of this *principle of tension* and *need of criticism* stands for certain assumptions which are in line with the Christian understanding of man. Man is a free individual and has creative abilities ; but he is also capable of destroying what he builds, and his vitalities blind and easily mislead his reason. These weaknesses are worse on a collective level than on individual level. Further to a Christian there is no other God than the one who is revealed in Jesus Christ, and Him alone he should worship. Therefore religious freedom is fundamental. In the democratic Constitution of India it is sanctioned that one can profess, practise and propagate one's own religion. 'The significance of religious freedom for democratic freedoms of all kinds cannot be overstated. Democracy stands or falls with it in this country as in any other' (*Christian Participation in Nation-building*, 40).

However, it should be finally stated that the Christian faith shall be true to its prophetic function ; it shall interpret and appraise, and also formulate a critique on the events of social and national living. It might be a cry in the wilderness, but still it must utter its voice of prophecy.

Sarvodaya.—We are all generally aware that the term 'Sarvodaya' is due to Gandhi who used the word to translate into Gujerati the title *Unto This Last* by Ruskin. The latter was interpreting the Biblical parable of the 'Labourers in the Vineyard'. The parable presents many problems and lends itself to several interpretations. I do not know if that of Ruskin is the best or the most Christian interpretation. Not only is there the problem of unemployment but also the people were said to have been standing *idle*. Again, it is not only the problem of *production* but since men must eat to live the problem of *distribution is also there*. No single interpretation alone will meet the demands of the Christian faith. However, Gandhi was most influenced by Ruskin's interpretation, and as he was then involved in labour problem in Africa, he soon put the teaching into practice. Sarvodaya means all people must be helped to rise in the standard of their living. Equality of opportunity and economic fraternity, and individual freedom—all are implied. In one word there must be what Vinoba later calls a *Samya Samaj*.

Mahatma Gandhi introduced two most important ideas into the working of this Sarvodaya programme—*satya* as the goal of life to be realized, and *ahimsa* as the means of realizing it. Though

he had derived inspiration from various other sources, he acknowledges that his own religion, particularly, Isavasyopanishad and Gita, revealed to him the truths. Satya (truth), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (celibacy), ahimsa (non-violence), and aparigraha (non-possession) are the most fundamental concepts of the Hindu social and political life according to the Hindu Sastras (Scriptures). Gandhi's Satya and Ahimsa summarize these principles and he vigorously applied them to the life of economics and politics. His movement of non-violent, non-co-operation and Svadeshi is well known. It was indeed a great revolution considering from the standpoint of the then existing situation; but there were other radical thinkers in the country who considered him not progressive enough; some even criticized him as reactionary. So the Communists, particularly taking advantage of certain circumstances after Independence, grew violent and went on causing destruction and damage to life and prestige of the country (cf. Hyderabad activities).

It was at this time that Vinoba Bhave started his movement of Bhudan-yajna. During the course of the last few years it has made, in fact, surprising strides of progress. Many people who have large tracts of land donated to him a few acres each, thus making millions of acres of land all over the country. He has made arrangements to distribute this land to the landless. He was able to enlist from people not only bhudan (land donation) but also shramdan (labour donation), sampatdan (wealth donation), vijnanadan (knowledge donation), etc.

His whole aim is to bring about the required social revolution without resort to violent methods or coercion or even parliamentary legislative measures. He says: 'We want to overhaul the entire social structure without recourse to violence, that is, we want both peace and revolution. Revolution is indispensable. Now if we want peace also then we have to prove that peace, too, has the power to revolutionize the society—not gradually but with the speed of revolution.' He believes that man is essentially good and given time and properly persuaded, he will share with others what all he has. Thus eventually there will be a society in which freedom, equality and fraternity in a life of love prevail and exist. This, according to him, is the kingdom of God on earth of the Christians, the classless society of the Communists.

The anthropological assumptions back of this movement clearly stand in contrast to those of the Christian faith. Religiously, the movement is based on faith in Vedantic monism. Man is essentially good and his nature can be perfected gradually. There is 'soul-force' in man which can work for good and creative projects. But the Christian faith persistently believes that man is a sinner and human life and work involve complicated relationships and tensions. The movement of Sarvodaya makes too simple of these relationships and speaks of revolution without resort to violence or coercion. It dulls the sense of revolution and impedes the progress and self-reliance of the common people.

CONCLUSION

As I said at the beginning, back of all these movements is secularism and scientism disbelieving all what religion believes as supernatural. But on that account it is not for a Christian to curse these movements—not even communism—and to consider them as arising outside the operation of God's power and will. It is generally said that communism is God's judgement on the Church; but one can also interpret that the rise of communism undoubtedly hastened the freedom and development of the backward countries. The colonial Powers would not have given up their power so soon but for the tensions due to the Communist challenge. America indeed is helping and keeping the free world strong precisely to protect herself against the totalitarian world. Thus God uses these Powers sometimes as 'rods' to chastise others; and some other times as agents to free and protect and help others. Therefore, whether it is Communist order, or the democratic structure, or the Sarvodaya form, of society, a Christian has to accept it as *given* by God. For it is finally the *grace* of God that redeems these different forms of society when the day of judgement brings all these under condemnation. However, the Christian should oppose and criticize those forms whenever they conflict with the principles of life according to Christian faith.

*Where knowledge is free ;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by
narrow domestic walls ;
Where words come out of the depth of truth ;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection ;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into
the dreary desert sand of dead habit ;
Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening
thought and action—
Into that haven of freedom, let our country awake.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE