Jesus: Freedom-Fighter or Prince of Peace?

(A Paper on Theological Aspects of the Topic)

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The central concern of Christian theology is the Christological concern of understanding and interpreting for each generation the nature and significance of the relation between the human and the divine dimensions of the person of Jesus Christ. While the issues raised in the Christological controversies of the classical period have never lost their relevance, different situations have demanded restatement of the faith underlying the Christological affirmations, depending on the social, religious, philosophical and cultural backgrounds.

The original source of the Christological affirmation is certainly the Biblical testimony which includes the narratives depicting both the genuine humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and the faith affirmations confessing him as the *logos* made flesh (John 1:14), as the image of the invisible God, in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col. 1: 15, 19), as the one in whom God was, reconciling the world unto himself (2 Cor. 5:19) and as the Son of God who reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature (Heb. 1:2-3). The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the rightness or wrongness of these affirmations. Nor is it to consider the merits or demerits of the various historical attempts at Christological formulations. On the contrary it is an attempt to state how we may confess Jesus today in a manner which will both identify him as the Jesus of the Apostolic testimony and will also acknowledge him as the living Lord who brings a challenging and relevant message of good news to people in their contemporary struggles for freedom, justice, and meaningful human life.

The formulation of the faith in Jesus Christ by Indian Christian theologians has already produced a rich variety of models. They are not radically different from models produced by western theology, but they have used categories derived from the Indian religious philosophies. While sharing the basic affirmation that in Jesus Christ we are involved with God, the ultimate Reality, their interpretation of the Reality-Christ relationship varies according to the theological or philosophical system adopted by each theologian. Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya combines the Thomistic model with Advaita Vedanta and affirms that God, the ultimate reality, the supreme *parabrahman* has become incarnate in Jesus Christ. While recognising the importance of the venerations of the *avataras* of Hinduism he rejects the use of the word *avatara* for Christ. His affirmation of the uniqueness of

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Christ as the incarnation of the supreme Reality establishes the continuity of his faith with that of the apostles. At the same time his involvement with the socio-political realities of his time provided the perspective for a positive appraisal of what Hindu religion and culture possessed. The Bhakti tradition of Ramanuja's *Visishtadvaita* is the framework for A. J. Appasamy's Christology. He also combines the apostolic faith in Christ with a glad acceptance of whatever is good and true in the Indian heritage. In doing so he finds the concepts of *avatara* helpful for the interpretation of the uniqueness of the Christ event. Chenchiah's Christology based on the reinterpretation of yoga in Aurobindo Ghose and Master C.V.V. is more in line with process-theology and Teilhard de Chardin. For him also the apostolic testimony about the uniqueness of the new creation in Christ is quite central, even though his main concern is how the new being, the new man, can be realised in our experience. The 'raw fact of Christ' and the reproduction of the new man through the yoga of the Holy Spirit are the two poles of his Christology. V. Chakkarai's Christology expounded in his book *Jesus the Avatar* has a slightly different model. But he also, by affirming that Jesus was *the* avatara and interpreting the permanent and abiding significance of the once-for-all event of the incarnation and the Cross using categories and terminology derived from the Hindu religio-philosophical heritage, represents basically the same type of approach as the others, namely that of restating the faith of the apostles in the language and thought forms relevant for the Indian situation.

All these and other models used by the Indian theologians so far have certainly contributed much to the development of Christian theology in India and we can continue to learn from them. These as well as the classical and western orthodox Christological models have one common factor, namely the confession that the reality known and experienced in Jesus Christ is God, the supreme, ultimate reality. But the question: Who is God, what is the supreme ultimate reality has no final answer in any of these models. The confession of Jesus Christ as the once-for-all incarnation of God, whose incarnation has become a continuing event through his resurrection means that the presence and the reality of God have to be discerned contextually in our different personal, social and political situations. The question whether Jesus is to be confessed today as Freedom fighter or Prince of Peace has significance for us only in terms of the present socio-political reality in which the freedom fighter symbolises the universal struggle for justice and liberation. In his book *Liberation Theology: Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel*, Frederick Herzog says that Christian truth takes on a different meaning when seen from the standpoint of the 'wretched of the earth' (Seabury Press, New York, 1972).

There are many different forms of struggle for justice, liberation and peace in the world today and the freedom fighters have different images. Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Vinoba Bhave are one type of freedom fighters. Mao Tse Tung, Fidel Castro are another type. There are also many movements such as the Frelimo for removing racial oppression in Africa and other parts of the world. The Naxalites, the Bhim Sena, Dalit Panther, and the J. P. Narayan movement

would also fall under different categories of freedom fighters. It is obvious that apart from the fact that there are many different struggles today for liberation from oppression and injustice and exploitation there is no common pattern of leadership for these struggles and there is no universally recognised image of a freedom fighter. Further, through various associations Christians are traditionally accustomed to calling Jesus Christ the 'Prince of Peace'. Therefore in the face of the many ambiguities of the meaning of the freedom fighter and the weight of Christian tradition, when we are asked whether Jesus is to be confessed today as the freedom fighter or the Prince of Peace the temptation would be to affirm that He is the Prince of Peace and not the freedom fighter. But the facts of the apostolic testimony and the realities of the contemporary human struggles do not justify such a simple either-or choice. We need to match our theological reflection and reformulation with a more profound awareness of the meaning of the apostolic testimony and the contemporary facts and realities.

First, we need to look afresh at the Biblical testimony to grasp more clearly the facts of Jesus. As John McIntyre says in his book *The Shape of Theology* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1966) 'Christology must constantly be returning to the original account we have of its subject matter. It must be constantly re-examining the terms in which the Bible first described Jesus. It must be reassessing the stories which the primitive Church recorded about him. For that re-examination and re-assessment there can be no substitute, and to it there can be no end' (p. 39 f). He also affirms that 'the reliability of the records is part of the case for the Christian faith' (p. 41). He further emphasises rightly that in so far as the Bible is 'a vehicle of communication by a person or persons to others all within specific social and political as well as economic, geographical and cultural contexts', sociological analysis has to lay bare the main features of the society in which Christ lived. 'In short', he adds, 'the fact of the incarnation compels us to acknowledge that part at least of christological method must be devoted to the examination of the geographical and sociological aspects of the situation in which it took place' (p. 44).

When we examine the titles 'freedom fighter' and 'prince of peace', it is important to note that neither of these expressions are found in the New Testament. The expression 'Prince of Peace' is from the Old Testament (Is. 9 : 6). Both 'peace' and 'freedom' are, however, familiar concepts of the Old and the New Testaments. It is one of the N. T. affirmations that Jesus Christ came to bring freedom as well as peace. Both freedom and peace have socio-political as well as spiritual significance. The meaning of Jesus' mission will get distorted if the freedom and peace brought by Jesus are interpreted exclusively as spiritual or as socio-political.

Whereas for several centuries there has been a distorted over-emphasis on the 'spiritual' dimensions of the meaning of the Person and Work of Christ, at the present time there is a growing concern to discover the socio-political dimensions. Of course the term *spiritual*, understood as related to the work of the Holy Spirit according to the apostolic testimonies, should include all the dimensions of

human life including the socio-political. But traditionally it has been interpreted in a partial way to mean the other-worldly, purely religious, inward and individualistic aspects of salvation experience with the necessary consequences of making the Gospel irrelevant or only partially relevant to the real social, economic and political problems affecting human life. The new concern for the socio-political implications of the Gospel has produced in the West what has been called political theology. Commenting on this Gustavo Gutierrez in his book *A Theology of Liberation*, (Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1973) writes:

> 'The new political theology represents, nevertheless, a fertile effort to think the faith through. It takes into consideration the political dimensions of the faith and is indeed aware of the most pervasive and acute problems which today's man encounters. It also represents an original recasting of the question of the function of the Church in the World today. This has been a breath of fresh air for European theology. It has been contrasted with other contemporary theological trends more tied to "tradition" but less related to living and urgent issues. But the approach of the new political theology must avoid the pitfalls both of "naivete" regarding the influences of advanced capitalist society as well as of a narrow ecclesiastical framework, if it wishes to reach the arena where the future of society and the Church is being decided' (p. 225).

The implication for Christology is the need for a fresh assessment of the life of Jesus in the light of the socio-political realities which formed the context of his life and ministry. What is called for is not the old quest for the Jesus of history as distinct from the Christ of faith, but the genuinely historical Jesus, the truth of whose life and ministry was the basis for the confession of faith. Acceptance of a formulation of faith or doctrines or liturgical forms or other traditions as the substance of the Christian religion without the necessary rootage in the historic Jesus has led to what Joseph Comblin has called an 'iconization' of the life of Jesus. In his book, *Theologie de la revolution*, he says: 'In this way, the life of Jesus is no longer a human life, submerged in history, but a theological life, an icon. As happens with icons, his actions lose their human context and are stylized, becoming transformed into the signs of the transcendent and invisible world' (Quoted by Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 226). The problem is similar to what the early church encountered when different claims about spirit experience were made. This raised the question of how we discern the Holy Spirit. The answer given in the first epistle of John is that the true test of the Holy Spirit is the confession that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 4:2). What he means is that the Holy Spirit is not a reality unrelated to or independent of the reality known in the Jesus of Nazareth. Knowledge of the historic Jesus and his ministry in the context of the socio-political realities of his time and place is crucial for a genuine experience of the Holy Spirit. It is also through the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit

that we discern the meaning and power of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. No Christology can be true unless it is rooted in the human Jesus of Nazareth and is fully aware of all the human, social and political relationships in which he was involved.

Of course the development of a genuinely meaningful and powerful Christology is dependent on the fruits of Biblical scholarship. The relationship is such that without much further enquiry and reflection we cannot simply replace an a-political Christ with a political Christ. We can, however, ask for an enquiry as to how far the Biblical scholarship as well as the theological formulations leading to the image of an a-political Christ or a political Christ have been sociologically conditioned. Are there vested interests in building up an a-political or a political image of Christ? Is an objective image of Christ and theological formulation completely free from vested interests possible?

On the basis of some of the studies that have been made we can see that Jesus was aware of the socio-political forces at work in his time. But he also knew that man's involvement in sin, oppression and injustice was such that a political solution alone was not sufficient. He rejected the temptation to be a political messiah. Various studies on the Zealots and Jesus' relation to them have brought out this truth quite clearly. (See Oscar Cullman: *The State in the New Testament*, SCM Press, London, 1967; Oscar Cullman: *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, Harper Row, New York, 1970; S.G.F. Brandon: *Jesus and the Zealots*, Manchester Univ. Press, 1967). These studies, particularly those by Oscar Cullman, have shown that some of Jesus' disciples had been Zealots (*The State:* p. 17; *Jesus and the Revolutionaries:* pp. 8-9). As summarised by Gutierrez there were 'many points of agreement between the Zealots and the attitudes and teachings of Jesus, for example, his preaching of the Kingdom and the role he himself plays in its advent, his attitude towards the Jews who worked for the Romans, his action of purifying the temple, his power over the people who wanted to make him king' (*op. cit.*, p. 227). At the same time it was obvious that Jesus' mission was quite different from that of the Zealots and he did not support the Zealots. The universality of Jesus' mission was in conflict with their narrow nationalism which excluded the Samaritans and the pagans from their messianism. In his rejection of the use of violence also Jesus radically differed from the Zealots. His deliberate choice of a donkey rather than a horse for his demonstration march on Jerusalem also symbolises his character as a man of peace who would not conform to the Zealots' image of a conquering Messiah.

It is also pointed out that both in his confrontation with the power groups of the Jewish people and in his death at the hands of the political authorities we have further evidence of his coming into conflict with socio-political structures and not simply with religious beliefs and practices (Gutierrez: *op. cit.*, pp. 228-230). But even though Jesus did not support the Zealot movement nor agree with their methods he did not openly condemn them as he did the Pharisees and the Sadducees. This suggests that Jesus recognised, though only very indirectly, the validity of the Zealots' opposition to the unjust socio-

political structures. He was only critical of their methods and the limitations of their goals. In that situation the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the Scribes were the custodians of the *status quo* of Judaism, and the Zealots could be regarded as revolutionaries and freedom fighters. Though Jesus did not identify himself with those freedom fighters his sympathy was more with them than with those who wanted the religious *status quo*.

The studies of Jesus' confrontation with the socio-political structures have also raised the question of whether Jesus sought the reform of the structures or only individual conversion. Cullmann, while recognising the relation between the conversion of the individual and the reform of the structures has concluded that 'Jesus was concerned only with the conversion of the individual and was not interested in a reform of the social structures'. He also explains this as due to his expectation of an imminent end of history (*Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, pp. 51, 55). Gutierrez has commented that Cullmann's interpretation suffers from an inadequate understanding of the political sphere (*op. cit.* p. 247). Differing from Cullmann he says rightly that 'when Jesus preached personal conversion, he pointed to a fundamental permanent attitude which was primarily opposed not to a concern for social structures, but to purely formal worship, devoid of religious authenticity and human content. . .To neglect this aspect is to separate the call to personal conversion from its social, vital and concrete context' (p. 230). He adds further, 'For Jesus, the liberation of the Jewish people was only one aspect of a universal, permanent revolution. Far from showing no interest in this liberation, Jesus rather placed it on a deeper level, with far reaching consequences. . . The deep human impact and the social transformation that the Gospel entails is permanent and essential, because it transcends the narrow limits of specific historic situations and goes to the very root of human existence: the relationship with God in solidarity with other men. The Gospel does not get its political dimension from one or another political option, but from the very nucleus of its message. If this message is subversive, it is because it takes on Israel's hope, the Kingdom as the end of domination of man over man; it is a Kingdom of contradiction to the established powers and on behalf of man. . . The life and preaching of Jesus postulate the unceasing search for a new kind of man in a qualitatively different society' (p. 231).

The trend of the discussion is that we cannot simply make an either-or choice between the freedom-fighter model and the prince of peace model for a formulation of Christology. Jesus, in the New Testament, is both a freedom fighter and a prince of peace, but with very significant difference.

His ministry is for the liberation of people from the bondage of sin in all its power, with its personal and corporate dimensions. Man's liberation and salvation cannot be complete without the removal of sin in his corporate life, without the elimination of the roots of bondage, oppression and injustice in the socio-political structures of his corporate existence. But this ministry is fulfilled not by following the methods and techniques of the political freedom fighters using violence

on the enemies of freedom. His method is that of the *suffering servant*, taking upon himself the consequences of man's sin, violence, oppression and injustice. His birth in a manger and his death on the cross are eloquent symbols of his way of peace, making himself the victim of injustice for bringing about the liberation from injustice and oppression. He suffered the consequences of man's sin in order to liberate man from his bondage to sin.

In an article entitled *Can man transcend violence?* Ray Gingerich describes Jesus as the prototype for a qualitatively new stance in society (*Religion in Life*—Summer, 1974, pp. 161-174). He affirms that 'contrary to much of contemporary theology, the man Jesus made some kind of political dent in his society'. He also points out that, in the New Testament 'the Cross as a symbol of suffering is not depicted as a ritually prescribed instrument of salvation but as a socio-political alternative to both insurrectionary violence and to withdrawal' (p. 168). He explains the stance of Jesus as the suffering servant in the following points. First, Jesus' religion was not limited to the private sector of life. Second, refusing to accept the givenness of both the ecclesiastical establishment and the political power structures, he identified with the underdog, the poor, the oppressed. Third, he refused to compromise the quality of his actions and resort to violence. When, humanly speaking, there were but two ways, to kill or to be killed, he chose the latter. Fourth, precisely at this point he opened the way for a third option, the freedom to creatively transcend life by showing love to the enemies and forgiving those who revile, thereby opening the possibility of a qualitatively new social order (p. 169).

The way he expounds the meaning of the suffering servant as taking a qualitatively new stance in life is very suggestive and helpful. He says: 'To be a suffering servant means to be abnormally human, so exceptionally human that we run against the grain of the givenness of the oppressing society:. . .he refuses to allow the givenness of society to determine who he is. He is a man who sees beyond the frontiers of his own social existence' (p. 170).

The recognition of Jesus' solidarity and identification with the downtrodden and the oppressed as crucial for his Saviourhood and his confrontation with the complex religious and socio-political structures of the humanity he came to save as a suffering servant is reflected in the present policies and programmes of the ecumenical movement as well as of several individual churches. The World Council of Churches, for example, has been asking for our taking sides with the oppressed and the poor in their struggle for justice. This call has been repeated in a consultation held at Montreux earlier this month (Dec, 1-6. 1974). Pointing out that masses of people are caught in a struggle for survival, seeking to liberate themselves from poverty and oppression, the consultation called upon churches around the world to identify with and support the struggle of the poor for social justice and liberation. The statement issued by this consultation has these words: 'The righteousness of God in the Old Testament has shown itself in the deliverance of the poor from their oppressors, in the vindication of the defenceless, in the protection of the orphan and the widow, in a definite taking of sides with the victims of injustice.

Jesus Christ reveals the righteousness of God also in this partisanship with the poor, and we need to ask the ecclesiastical question whether the Church can be the church if it is not identified with the poor. Some would go even further and insist that the Church has to be poor in order to be identified with the poor, and that in a church that is wealthy and powerful the word of God may be bound'. Along with such statements we also need to consider the question raised by Dr M. M. Thomas, the chairman of the Central Committee of the W.C.C., at the last meeting in West Berlin regarding the life style of the churches and the World Council of Churches. He drew the contrast between the triumphalist and servant images of the Messiah and asked what the implications of a commitment to the Servant image would be for the operation of the World Council and its programmes.

Certainly Christology and ecclesiology are closely related. What is even more fundamental in this trend to formulate a Christology related to the role of the freedom fighter and the Prince of Peace is its implication for the nature of ultimate reality. By our confession of Jesus as the one in whom God has confronted us with his salvation, we affirm the essential character of ultimate reality. How can the Indian Church bring home this insight to the dialogues with people of other faiths who hold other symbols or models of God and ultimate reality? This is one of the crucial issues of Christian theology in India today.

In Raymond Panikkar's outstanding work *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, as well as in certain other efforts at initiation of dialogue, there is a discernment of the reality of Christ in the intuitive philosophical and theological insights and in the interiority of the experience of God which are recognised as revelatory. Certainly such efforts are important both for the realisation of truth and for inter-religious understanding. However, the Christian confession of Jesus as the one in whom the fullness of the Godhead, the ultimate reality, has entered into and confronted human history, would challenge us to discern the presence and the activity of that reality of Christ in other movements which sought the reformation of unjust religio-social structures such as Buddha's reformation, the Bhasava Movement, the Bhakti movements, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Gandhian Sarvodaya movement etc.