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Ecclesiological Discussions in India During the Last Twenty-Five Years

T. V. PHILIP*

The purpose of this paper is to point out certain basic trends in the ecclesiological discussions in India in the last quarter of a century. A number of articles and books published in India which simply repeat or summarise western discussions on the doctrine of the Church are left out from our consideration.

In the history of Indian Christian theology, there was no serious discussion of the doctrine of the Church as such. There was more than one reason for this lack of interest in ecclesiology. When we survey the history of India's response to the Christian Gospel, we see two distinct groups of people who have responded to the Gospel. One group was from the upper caste and class of Indian society with the background of philosophical Hinduism and theirs was an individual and not a group response to the Gospel. The other group was from the 'out-castes' and tribals through mass or group movements. The intellectual and vocal leadership of the Protestant Churches in the earlier period came from the former group. They were the people who realized the need for developing an Indian Christian theology and their efforts were more directed towards interpreting God and His revelation in Jesus Christ in terms of Hindu religious and philosophical thought and experience than developing an ecclesiology.

The development was somewhat similar to the development of theology in the Eastern Churches in the Roman Empire. While the Latin theologians were more interested in the doctrine of the Church, its structure, ministry and sacraments, the Greek theologians were more interested in interpreting God and His revelation in terms of Greek philosophy and metaphysics. Hinduism never had the consciousness of being a Church as it is understood by Christians. For the Hindu the creeds, confessions and the institutional Church represent a low form of religious development. So the doctrine of the Church has received only a scant attention from the Indian theologians. For them the experience of God is primary and not the dogmas and institutions. Moreover, several of the Indian Christian theologians were highly critical of the organised Church as it was found in India because of its western (foreign) character and structure and it was some of them who later raised the question of an indigenous Church.

* Dr. Philip is the Director of the Senate of Serampore.

A second reason for this lack of interest among the Protestant theologians in the doctrine of the Church can be found in the theology of the Protestant missionary movement. At the heart of the early Protestant missionary theology there was a separation of Church and mission. It focussed attention on conversion and often neglected the doctrine of the Church. In the beginning of the Protestant missionary movement in India, the aim was not to develop an indigenous Church but to save souls. Gustav Warneck, the German mission historian, at the beginning of this century pointed out that, for the whole of the older missionary generation, 'the task of mission was to make believers of the individual heathen that they might be saved through faith and to gather those heathens who had become believers into ecclesiolae which had formed entirely out of the pietist or methodist fashion.'¹ The theology and the organisational set-up of the missionary movement were such that the converts in India were considered as belonging to the missionary societies and not to an Indian Church. For the majority of the Indian Christians themselves there was no consciousness of belonging to an Indian Church, but only to different missionary societies. They were C.M.S. or L.M.S. or American Methodist Christians. Hence it was not surprising that the doctrine of the Church did not receive much attention from the Indian Christian theologians.

It was only after the growth of the national movement that a consciousness of belonging to an Indian Church began to take root among Indian Christians. The impact of the national movement on the life and thought of the Indian Church can never be minimized. The history of Protestant Christianity in the first half of this century was in one sense a history of indigenisation, of grappling with the theology, structure and organisation of an Indian Church. For several of the Indian Christian leaders the alienation of the Indian Christian community from the rich heritage of India's past was of great concern. While being loyal to its Lord, they felt that the Church in India should be truly Indian, should be recognised as such, expressing the religious aspirations of Christians in this land. There was a general feeling that the organisations, structure and theology of the Western Churches were not suited to India. India should find its own way of expressing fellowship in Christ. There were also attempts to organise a united Church in India along indigenous lines. The Christo Samaj in Calcutta and the National Church in Madras were such attempts. The vision of the leaders of a united Church in India was that 'it should be one, not divided, native and not foreign.' It was a movement against denominationalism, confessional theology and the foreignness of the Indian Church. In the first half of this century Indian Christian theologians were struggling to understand the Church in India in the context of the national awakening and the struggle for political freedom. The questions that were frequently discussed were the freedom of the Church from western colonial structures and missionary

¹ Gustav Warneck, *Outline of a History of Protestant Missions*, New York, 1906, p. 284.

paternalism, the cultural identity and the evolution of an Indian Christianity expressing the faith and structure of the Church in indigenous terms.

Many of the concerns expressed in the first half of this century continued in the discussions even after 1950. For example the book *Christian Worship in India*, edited by Bishop Lash and J. R. Chandran and published in 1961, raises the question of worship in relation to Indian cultural traditions. They point out that the Indian Church remains a 'potted plant' without any deep root in Indian culture and that this alienation of Indian Christianity from Indian culture is 'a serious stumbling block for evangelism. The consultation organised by the National Christian Council of India in Nasrapur in 1966 also raised similar criticisms of the Church in India. The report says:

However, in India as in many other Asian countries the Church to a very large extent took over the foreign patterns of institution, liturgy and theology, incorporating only in a very small degree indigenous cultural values. This foreignness of the Indian Church is a very serious stumbling block to many men of other faiths and a hindrance to the growth and deepening of the experience of the Indian Church. We also believe that many converts, particularly from Hinduism, find it difficult to adjust to the Church in its present form.²

But, one can find a general shift of emphasis in the ecclesiological discussions after 1950. Even in the question of the relation of Christianity to Indian culture, there is a marked difference in emphasis. While the need for cultural identity is taken seriously, it is generally acknowledged today that indigenisation does not mean simply to conform to Indian culture as it exists today. Jesus Christ comes as both the judge and the redeemer of all cultures. In an article on 'The Identity of the Indian Church', D. G. Moses points out that our efforts to indigenise should serve two purposes. Firstly, they are to redeem culture. After discussing several alternatives with regard to the relation between Christian faith and culture, he says:

The only alternative that points to a hopeful solution of this problem is Christ in and through culture. This does not deny culture but it thinks of a process in which every culture has been converted and transformed in obedience to Christ. In other words, every culture is made captive to Christ, and this redeemed culture sings his praise.³

The Christian attitude to culture is one of discrimination.

² *Findings of the National Consultation on 'Mission of the Church in Contemporary India,' March 21-26, 1966, p. 27.*

³ D. G. Moses in *The Indian Church: Identity and Fulfilment*, ed. Mathai Zachariah, C.L.S., 1971, p. 212.

Certain schools of theological thinking in recent days have tried to show that it is not the Church that is the supreme category of the Christian faith but the doctrine of the Kingdom of God. It has been said that we have overemphasised the Church and that it is time we returned to the original message of our Lord, namely the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. This change of emphasis is due to the natural swing of theological thought from one extreme to another. From our point of view we feel that the Church is an instrument in the hands of the Lord of the Church to prepare for the ushering in of the Kingdom of God. Not that the Church by itself can ever bring about the Kingdom of God. That is the work of the Lord of the Church, Jesus Christ, and he will bring it to pass in his own good time. But the Church is a sign of the coming of the Kingdom and an indication in a microscopic way of what the Kingdom of God will be in a macroscopic way. The Church is the first-fruit of the Kingdom.⁷

According to Moses, the Church is both an instrument and sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. M. M. Thomas in his book *Salvation and Humanisation* asks the question whether there should be a Church into which a convert to Christ must enter through Baptism. He himself answers the question thus:

However, if we look more closely at the statement of those who have questioned whether the Church and the sacraments are essential, I think in most cases it will be clear that what they are asking is whether it is necessary for them to join the Church as it has found its form in the communities of India. That is to say, in most cases the question is not of the necessity of Church or baptism as a sacrament, it is with regard to the form of the Church.⁸

Thomas points out that even Keshub Chandra Sen, who acknowledged Christ but did not join the Church, defended the idea of the Church and the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. To Thomas the question whether the Church is essential or not is an outdated question; the real question is the form the Church should take in the Indian situation.

None of these writers, while emphasising the necessity of the Church, is defending the present day self-understanding of the Church and its form. They are very critical of it. Their emphasis is on the necessity for a community and fellowship transcending the natural divisions in society and the community of believers in Christ as an instrument and sign of the coming Kingdom. The missionary dimension of the Church is very much in the forefront. This emphasis on the Church on the part of Indian theologians has come not only from

⁷ D. G. Moses in *The Indian Church: Identity and Fulfilment*, p. 213.

⁸ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, pp. 37-38.

the study of the Bible, but also from the historical experience of the Church itself. A large section of Indian Christians formerly belonged to the untouchables of Indian society. The stigma of untouchability that rested upon them for generations had condemned them to a semi-human existence. For many of the untouchables who joined the Church it represented an escape from the dehumanising values and conditions of their existence in Hindu society. It was its concern for the personal dignity and equality of persons expressed in the fellowship of the Church which gave the Gospel appeal and relevance among the outcastes. The very fact that these people were considered as human beings with dignity and freedom and were brought into the fellowship of the Church was something revolutionary and was a judgement on the practice of untouchability and a source of tension within the larger Indian society in the past. It is exactly at this point, one may feel, that the Indian Church today with its elitist and middle-class ethos has lost its social appeal to the poor and dispossessed sections of Indian society.

We shall now look at some of the specific elements in ecclesiological discussion today. In recent years there has been a search for self identity or selfhood in the Indian Church. While the Indian national awakening and cultural renaissance helped the Churches to break away from too close an identification of the Gospel and Christianity with western culture and western imperialism, the emergence of India in 1947 as a nation state with a selfhood of its own has made the Church take more seriously the search for its own selfhood corresponding to the new selfhood of the nation, and to rediscover its mission in a new way in contemporary society. The Indian writers often quote the statement of K. H. Ting of China, that China, after the revolution, has found itself and that the Church in China has discovered that it is a Church for China.

The 'selfhood' of the Church became a topic of discussion with the publication of D. T. Niles' book *Upon the Earth* in 1962. In this book Niles states that the real need for a Church is to find itself and he points out that in defining a Church its location or the place where the Church is found is very important. The theme for the triennial assembly of the National Christian Council of India in 1971 was 'The Indian Church: Identity and Fulfilment'. As preparatory study material for the assembly, the study department of the N.C.C.I. published a book on the same theme. In the introduction to the book, Mathai Zachariah states that our failure to know the essence of the Church, its basic selfhood, is the cause of many of the problems the Church is facing today. He goes on to say, 'We are seeking in this book the essential self of the Church in India today, so that it could discern the signs of the times and respond to the challenges it is called to face.' According to Zachariah, knowledge of the self is an essential condition for the fulfilment of the Church's responsibility. The various articles in this volume reflect the assumption that knowledge of self and *dharma* are inseparable. In Indian thinking knowledge of self is the awareness of the Church that it is a Church in India with a mission to the people in India. The 'Indianness' of the Church is

A second purpose of indigenisation according to Moses is to use indigenous culture as a medium of communication. Today, when Indian theologians speak of relatedness to culture, they are not thinking only in terms of traditional culture. There is a recognition that there are different cultural streams in India and all of them are in a process of change under the impact of modernity. So Indianness should be defined in terms not only of traditional Indian religions and cultures but also of the impact on them of secularisation and modernisation. It is to this Indianness, conceived as a process of cultural becoming, that the Church must relate itself.⁴

There were several factors which contributed to a shift of emphasis in ecclesiological discussions in India after 1950. Among the reasons we should specially mention the political independence of India in 1947 and the awareness of Indian theologians of the religious, cultural and theological pluralism in Indian society, the search of modern India for a new national community transcending traditional divisions and loyalties and the effort to bring about social justice for the common man. This made theologians rethink the nature of the Church and the form it must assume if it is to fulfil its missionary responsibility in contemporary society.

Before we mention some of the specific aspects of ecclesiological discussions today, we need to make one thing clear. While ideas such as non-Church Christianity and religionless Christianity are current in present day theological discussions in other countries, Indian theologians on the whole affirm the necessity of the Church, though they may differ among themselves as to their interpretation of the nature of the Church. There is a good deal of criticism in India of the institutional Church, its form and structure, but there is no radical rejection of the Church.⁵ This is clearly seen in the writings of P. D. Devanandan, M. M. Thomas, J. R. Chandran, Paul Varughese, D. G. Moses and several others. Chandran Devanesan, in his *Fred J. Cato Lectures in Australia*, states:

I do not think the Church is a perfect institution and its many failures are only too evident. But I do believe it is the instrument God has given us by which to bring Christ's healing spirit to the nations, so that we may through mutual repentance and forgiveness discover the true community for which we all long and which can only come into the world through Him. We cannot claim that the Church is as yet an ideal community, but God in Christ is at work through it, breaking down the barriers that separate man from man and man from God.⁶

For Devanesan, the Church exists as an instrument to bring Christ's healing spirit to the world so that the world may discover the basis of true human community. To quote D. G. Moses:

⁴ M. M. Thomas, *ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵ This is in contrast with the ideas expressed by some theologians like P. Chenchiah in the first half of this century.

⁶ Chandran Devanesan, *Asian Resurgence and the Church*, 1972, p. 40.

ment in the life of the people, that is in the history-making process. It is interesting that Cecil Hargreaves in his book *Asian Christian Thinking*¹³ has pointed out that for many Asian thinkers the Church is in essence more like a tree than a building.

According to Mathai Zachariah, an Indian understanding of Jesus Christ, a deeper knowledge of the religious and secular frontiers in which the Churches have to live in India, and a re-examination of the structure of the Church in the light of its missionary responsibilities are some of the steps to be taken in our search for self-identity.

A second emphasis in ecclesiological discussion today is on the Church as an open community. In 1975 the Study Department of the National Christian Council of India published a collection of essays by different authors under the title *The Church: A Peoples' Movement*. Several of the authors emphasise that 'openness' is the fundamental characteristic of the Church of Christ. Samuel Amirtham speaks of the Church of Christ as an open community. In this volume there are two essays which need special mention. One is by Samuel Rayan, a Roman Catholic theologian, on 'Spirituality in the Indian Church Today',¹⁴ and the other by M. M. Thomas on 'The Open Church'.¹⁵ Both the authors make it clear that openness does not mean any lack of commitment. It does not come out of a relativism which knows nothing as ultimate, but comes out of a deep commitment to the Gospel. What does this openness mean for the Church in India? Rayan observes that a remarkable fact of the Indian spirit has always been its openness to many different experiences, viewpoints and traditions, be they human, cultural or religious. He points out that some people have attributed openness to an unconcern for truth in religious matters coupled with an overemphasis on experience. But Rayan says, 'In this criticism, experience is duly contrasted with truth, religious truth is confused with conceptual knowledge and the fact is overlooked that truth of religion is a truth of relationship and therefore of lived experience.' According to him, a spirituality of openness to the riches and freedom of God and his self-disclosure in people can spare the Church the mistake of absolutising itself and its historical heritage, or of posing as the only prophet and servant of God on earth. 'The Church will surely speak with confidence the Good News it has heard, but it will also be ready to listen and to learn. For it is possible and likely that other experiences of life and of God hold in their hearts and hands some gifts and glad tidings which they are bringing from God for us just as we are bringing news and gifts from God for them.'¹⁶ Rayan calls the churches to a deepening reflection on religious pluralism and to ponder on the variety of spiritual experiences and religious expressions held in honour in the Indian scene. Then he says:

¹³ Cecil Hargreaves, *Asian Christian Thinking*, I.S.P.C.K., 1972, pp. 3-18.

¹⁴ Mathai Zachariah (ed), *The Church: A Peoples' Movement*, N.C.C.I. 1975, pp. 11-26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-72.

¹⁶ Mathai Zachariah (ed), *The Church: A Peoples' Movement*, pp. 17-18.

very much emphasised. However, the identity of the Church is not simply a sociological identity. It is recognised that the Church's identity is rooted in Jesus Christ. 'The identity of the Church is the identity of the Lord of the Church . . . The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.'⁹ Indian theologians have never lost sight of the universal character of Christian fellowship. Again and again, it has been pointed out that the identity of the Church is not based on ethnic identity or caste relation or national allegiance.¹⁰ According to M. M. Thomas, Christian fellowship is based on a common sharing of the divine forgiveness through Christ. The human solidarity of forgiven sinners becomes the source of a new type of community life.

The fellowship of a new humanity finds its symbol in the fellowship of the Church which beckons to its fold men of different languages and nations, different religions and cultural traditions and different social and economic status, based on their recognition solely of their need for divine forgiveness, and builds them up into a single well knit body. . . Here men see one another in their dignity as created by God and redeemed by God through Christ and open to one another as brothers for whom Christ died. And the openness and universality of its brotherhood challenges every closed communal solidarity in society and becomes a source of their spiritual and ethical affinity. . .¹¹

But, when Indian theologians speak of universalism, they are not speaking of a kind of internationalism which is in contradiction to the particularity and the locality of the Indian Church. Indian writers stress that, because the Gospel (and Church fellowship) is universal, it should express this universality in terms of the particular and local. Hence the identity of the Church is understood in terms of the world in which the Church is found. Locality is an important element in the self-understanding of the Church. The identity in relation to the world around also means identity in relation to Indian history. So far the Church in India has been understood in terms of western missionary expansion. It was only a dot on a map of the mission field. Attempts are being made now to interpret the history of Christianity in the context of and in relation to the mainstream of Indian history. 'It is by understanding ourselves as part of the history of the Indian nation and by participating in the divine movement in the life of our people that we shall understand what it means to be a Church in India.'¹² Self-identity is not a static concept. It is a movement and a growth which takes place as the Church participates in the divine move-

⁹ D. G. Moses in *The Indian Church: Identity and Fulfilment*, p. 215.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ M. M. Thomas, on 'Ethics' in *Christianity*, Punjabi University, 1976, pp. 47-50.

¹² T. V. Philip, 'Selfhood of the Church and the Study of Church History', *The Guardian*, Sept. 30, 1971.

Our meditation will reach out towards 'the depths of wealth, wisdom and knowledge in God, his unsearchable judgements and untraceable ways' as reflected in the spiritual history of this land. Exploration of the meaning and possibilities of pluralism must continue, and corresponding plurality must grow and mature within the Church. The Church, then, stands summoned to a radical rethinking of its heavy penchant for uniformity. Let its faith respond creatively to the diversity of the Spirit's charismata and to the variety of life's situations and of peoples, and let a hundred flowers bloom, and a plurality of theologians, faith-formulations, worship forms and ecclesial structures shape up and emerge.¹⁷

For Rayan, it is in pluralism and openness that the Church experiences freedom. He speaks of a period in the religious history of India when every detail of faith and worship was under priestly control and when religion stagnated into a heartless system of legalistic externalism and impersonal mechanism. However, *Bhaktas* and saints fought for freedom.

The deepest vein in the history of India is the story of its struggle to win spiritual freedom. And what was won proved to be a responsible freedom: faith in God and prayer, religious observance and ethical striving have in large measure continued among the masses without a central authority and a separate clerical order, without commandments threatening their violators with eternal hell, without endless fulminations from Sunday pulpits. The Church could surely do with something of an experience of that freedom which is where the Spirit of the Lord is. It could do with fewer rules and controls, and with far more of love's fantasy and the expanse of the sky and sea . . . with such a new quality and style of its life, the Church in India and elsewhere could balance the structures based on coercion, and bring healing and human peace to people lest they forget their great name and destiny.¹⁸

According to Rayan, the Church in India will be greatly enriched by its openness to Indian religious traditions and experiences and could learn a lot in understanding its nature, theology and function. For him, the quality of life and relationships is far more important than doctrinal distinctions and theological niceties. He points out that India has a partiality for orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. According to him, it is this emphasis on orthopraxis which explains why Asia has refused to take the Christian Church seriously, when it announced a Gospel of justice, love and freedom in the context of, and often in collaboration with, colonial and neo-colonial systems of exploitation

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

and conquest. He says, 'It is not a question of unconcern for truth, but an apprehension of religious truth as being more than concepts, as something concrete, existential, personal and interpersonal.'

For Rayan, openness is not only to the religious traditions, but also to the hard social and economic realities under which people are suffering. 'Spirituality is willingness to live where God and man meet, where transcendence and immanence coincide.'¹⁹ He goes on to say:

Today's, therefore, will be a spirituality of involvement in the world of men, in their concerns and hopes, the gropings and tears, and not a spirituality of flight from the world, mistrust of man or retirement into cloisters. A cloister for the Church today cannot be a fenced off geographical area, but the truth about man whom God loves and the value-set born of that truth. . . Contemplation is possible where God is present and active in forgiving and redeeming love—in the cities and the streets, in the factories and slums, in the far flung villages of India, wherever men live and love and suffer and hope. . .²⁰

Rayan calls for a kenosis of the Church:

We need urgently to meditate on the need and implications of the Church's kenotic presence in India and Christianity's kenotic incarnation in this land. To continue to fear and avoid kenosis and Calvary, to refuse to be weaned from the privileges and positions which accrued to the Church in colonial times, to neglect rethinking and revising services developed in the days when we were innocent of socio-cultural analysis would amount to a denial of the Church's substance as incarnate redemptive presence.²¹

Rayan has introduced several important elements into the ecclesiological discussion. To be an open Church or a Church as a people's movement means for the Church to be an incarnate redemptive presence in the land. The identity of the Church or the nature of the Church is not defined by doctrinal statements or heresy hunting, but by its orthopraxis, by its openness to the world and by the quality and style of its life lived as a kenotic presence in India.

M. M. Thomas starts his essay with the statement that openness is a very fundamental characteristic of the Church and its form should be such that it should make its openness to God and to the world an abiding reality. For Thomas the openness of the Church arises out of commitment to Jesus Christ as the Ultimate. However, because the crucified and risen Lord is the Ultimate, all other truth-principles, laws, forms and values are relative. Hence he makes a distinction

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 23.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

The C.I.S.R.S. Consultation makes a distinction between conversion to Christ and conversion to the Christian Community. It is in this context that M. M. Thomas asks: if conversion to Christ does not necessarily imply conversion to the Christian community isolated from the communities in which the converts live, does that not imply that the Church can take form as a Christ-centred fellowship of faith and ethics in the Hindu religious community?²⁷

The discussion on conversion and Baptism has really raised the question of the form of the Church in a radical way. What form should the Church as a fellowship of faith in Christ take in India in contrast with the present form of a religious community?

A third element in the ecclesiological discussion is the unity of the Church. The question of Christian unity was a concern in India for several decades. We have already mentioned that the Christo Samaj of Calcutta and the National Church in Madras were started to work for a united Church in India. But their efforts did not succeed. However, from the beginning of this century efforts were made to unite various Protestant Churches which resulted in two important Church unions—the formation of the Church of South India and the Church of North India. The formation of the C.S.I. in 1947 was welcomed by all and there was great enthusiasm for organic Church union in the 1950s. But this enthusiasm gradually waned. Today several important questions are raised with regard to Church union and the nature of the unity we seek. The hope of the Indian Christian pioneers for an indigenous united Church did not materialise in the unions that took place. The basic approach in these unions was not to create an indigenous Church open to the religious, cultural and ideological pluralism of the society, but rather to reconcile and unite western denominational polities and confessions. We mention here only some of the ideas which have emerged and the questions that are asked in the recent discussions on the subject.

There is a recognition that the unity we seek is a unity in diversity. We have already mentioned the statement of Rayan that the Church should explore the meaning and possibilities of pluralism and that plurality must grow and mature within the Church. What will be the structure of a unity which will be strong enough to comprehend in Christ a plurality of theologies, faith formulations, worship forms, ecclesiastical structures and different kinds of cultural and social ethos? It is also realised that fellowship in the Church should be such that it transcends the divisive forces in Indian society such as caste, communalism and tribalism. These divisive forces still operate in the united Churches. It is understood today that some of the important causes for disunity and factionalism in the Church are historical, political, social and cultural and not merely doctrinal issues.²⁸ It has also been pointed out that the rediscovery of a common history of

²⁷ *Salvation and Humanisation*, p. 40.

²⁸ See T. V. Philip 'Search for Church Unity in Kerala', *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVII, No. 4, December 1970, pp. 55-57.

Christianity in India will be a step towards unity. Today we speak of different histories—history of the Latin rite, history of the C.M.S. or the history of Lutherans. These are not different histories but different streams in the one common history of Christianity in India. Differences are to be studied within this common stream and not in their crystallised denominational forms. We should not isolate one part from the other or give finality to one part. If we simply isolate events or segments from the whole, we miss the larger revelation that comes from a study of the whole.²⁹

It is pointed out again and again that ecumenical means more than 'inter-Church relations', and that the context for unity discussions in India should not be western denominationalism but the mission of the Church. The unity movement in India, in the past, was primarily concerned with the unity of ecclesiastical structures. They took for granted that once united into one ecclesiastical structure the Church would become a missionary force in India. But it did not prove to be so. Today there are those who speak not of unity but of 'polarisation' within the Church for the sake of commitment to the social revolution of our time. While they recognise the need for pluralism in the Church, pluralism does not mean for them 'peaceful co-existence'. According to E. V. Mathew:

The Church structures of today are apparently incapable of re-organising the conflict of interests prevalent in society. The unity they establish among the members does not take into account the hard realities of strife and struggle in life. Its role of reconciliation is artificial at the core and extremely marginal in effect. It induces only a sense of comfort on the basis of a false sense of belonging.³⁰

Mathew and others advocate the formation of breakaway movements committed to intermediary social goals. For them the mission is more important than the unity of the Church which is concerned only with 'law and order' problems. Such a unity, for them, only sanctifies a false unity by the betrayal of the real content of the Gospel.

The question that is raised is about the nature of unity and the relation between unity and mission. It is generally recognised today that unity questions divorced from missionary questions will lead to a static concept of unity solving only 'law and order' problems. What is clear in the present day discussion is that there is a dialectical tension between unity and mission and that this relationship should find theological and structural expression in a united Church. The C.I.S.R.S. Consultation on 'The Church in our Pluralistic Situation' states: 'It was observed that in the history of the Church, tensions and conflicts have arisen between unity and mission. But our search is for a creative tension between unity and social mission, in which unity will not be allowed to disrupt mission.' It is pointed out that, if the tension bet-

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁰ *Religion and Society*, Vol. XVII, No. 1, March 1970, p. 90.

ween unity and mission is to be kept healthy and not destructive, it can happen only in a community of grace and forgiveness expressed in Eucharistic fellowship. It is only in such a community that unity becomes flexible and such a community alone can prevent the absolutisation of ideologies and programmes.³¹

We have mentioned the three main elements in the ecclesiological discussions today, namely, the self-identity of the Church, the Church as an open community and the unity of the Church. They are not three completely separate elements but very much interrelated. They are discussed in the context of the Church's witness in contemporary society. One major issue raised in all three concerns is the form of the Church's presence in a society of religious and ideological pluralism and in a society of social revolution. Rayan speaks of the need for Christianity's 'kenotic incarnation' in India. For the sake of Christian presence in the social revolution, E. V. Mathew and others plead for breakaway movements within the Church with a commitment to specific social goals. In order to be open to religious and cultural pluralism, M. M. Thomas raises the possibility of forming Christ-centred fellowships within Hinduism. After discussing many ways in which men have been led to Christ, D. A. Thangaswamy observes: 'This would mean that we should expect different kinds of experiences and styles of living to be valid and especially helpful to different kinds of people coming to Christ. For some the life within the Church may be the best way, but for others it may be a continued identification with even the religious community of their birth and upbringing. There are enough indications that the Universal Church of the future will be the Church of one Lord and perhaps one truth but not of one "birth" if that means Baptism.'³²

As an answer to the crisis of authority and the quest of modern society for an authentic community, Paul Varughese suggests the formation of experimental Christian communities (with the possibility of even men of other faiths joining). He says: 'The Christian Church in India needs more than statements on national development or other socio-economic issues. It needs a community with a commitment to certain proximate and manageable goals and an ideology undergirding, controlling and correcting its programme of life and action.'³³ He pleads for the creation of experimental communities in several places with some measure of community among such small communities. 'All such communities will be directly oriented to the problems of humanity and not be simply inward-looking. Yet even in their engagement in the affairs of the world, they will be capable of disengagement of worship in the joy of freedom, where they can close the portals of history and enter into the eschaton where that history is already fulfilled.'³⁴ Then he goes on to say that such a community will engage

³¹ See 'The Nature of the Unity we seek', *N.C.C. Review*, No. 3, 1970.

³² *Religion and Society*, Vol. XIX, No. 1, March 1972, p. 49.

³³ T. Paul Varughese, *Freedom and Authority*, C.L.S., 1974, p. vii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

in all kinds of activities, but will be under no external pressure to do so. 'The community's activities will have to come out of its own deep convictions, but not for the sake of feeling "missionary or effective" . . . It seeks to achieve nothing but to be loyal and faithful to the new being given to it in Christ.'⁸⁵ For him, it is in such experimental community living that we learn what it means to be the light of the world.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.162.