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Jesus Christ—The Life of the World: An Indian Christian Understanding

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I

It is not the first time that a WCC Assembly has chosen a christological theme. Evanston (1954), New Delhi (1961), and Nairobi (1975) all had christological themes. This may also be said about Uppsala (1968), though to a lesser degree. The theme that lies before the coming Assembly in Vancouver next year is also strongly christological. It indeed appears to be even more substantially christological than any other so far. Evanston considered Christ especially from the eschatological perspective, and the New Delhi theme, theologically speaking, laid emphasis on the revelatory aspects of Christology. Nairobi thought of Christ primarily in relation to human liberation at various levels, and the unity of mankind. The Uppsala theme, like that of Evanston, was also primarily eschatological. The present theme, however, is wider than all these, and is capable of bringing together creation, redemption and consummation in a holistic manner. For in the New Testament, while both life and light are closely held together, life, that is Life Divine, precedes light.¹ This is also true of human life: without the gift of life, there can be no human activity—intellectual, volitional or emotional. In fact one can even go so far as to say that this theme is one way of looking at the whole of Christian theology from a relevant point of view in the modern world. This way of looking at the Christian faith can also be most fruitful in the Indian context today. Who knows, as the Evanston theme of hope became the forerunner of the theologies of hope a decade later, the Vancouver theme of life may give rise to a number of theological works in the coming decades.

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¹ Cf. John 1:4. This is also true of the Genesis narrative: the lifegiving Spirit "hovering" over the *tōhu wābōhū*, and the lifegiving Word bringing forth the light.

We need, however, to take note of the observation made by Dr Konrad Raiser, the Deputy General Secretary of the WCC, at this point, as regards the previous Assemblies. What happened in them was that the christological emphasis was not brought to the fore, but the discussions were centred around the predicates such as light, hope and liberation:

All these assembly themes are in their different ways attempts to combine the confession of Jesus Christ with the contemporary 'time signal,' with the signs of the time. But we can detect here a certain tendency to treat the second term of the theme independently. Discussion of the theme concentrates on hope, light, the coming of the New, on liberation and fellowship as the scope of the Christian witness. Only seldom, however, is there any reflection on the real significance of presenting the 'time signal' in the form of a confession of Christ.²

Vancouver 1983 will do well to heed this. For ultimately we cannot but take the christological aspects of the theme seriously, since Christology is the very basis of our faith and activity.

It lies in the very nature of theology that we cannot deal with any one part of it, without relating it to the whole. For it cannot but strive to be as coherent a whole as possible in any given moment and place. In view of this, considering such a fundamental theme as this would involve us with the whole range of Christian theology. This theme would, for example, raise such basic questions as: Who is this Jesus Christ, whom the Church confesses to be the life of the world? What is His relation to God? What does it really mean to say that Jesus Christ is the life of the world? What then is His relation to life in general, that is, actual life? What is the basis of this assertion that Christians make about Jesus Christ? What are the implications of this assertion for the world at large—the world of religious and ideological plurality? How can we relate this assertion to the beliefs and value systems, as well as the ways of life of other peoples?

² Konrad Raiser, "Jesus Christ—the Life of the World: A Meditation on the Theme of the Sixth Assembly," *The Ecumenical Review* 33, 6 (July 1981), p. 236.

In order to answer all these questions one needs to write one or more books, and not just an article!³ But none of these questions can be evaded or by passed. If our confession is to be meaningful and effective, then we must have adequate answers to all these questions. And we can hope that the Vancouver Assembly will take up all these questions seriously.

What I try to do in this paper is to present a few thoughts in connection with the meaning and significance of this confession, "Jesus Christ—the life of the world," as I understand it.

II

I said above that this is a confession. This, however, needs some further clarification. The term "confession" itself may cause confusion. Nowadays it has become fashionable to use this term in a subjective, personal and purely perspectival manner, and even to make it something private. But this is certainly not in agreement with the New Testament use of this term, where confession means a public attestation of something really real, which has truly happened *extra nos*, and which has consequences for the wider public. Hence no one can remain indifferent to it; but everyone must take note of it, and respond to it. For in the New Testament "confession" is not the result of something merely subjective, esoteric or speculative. It is a response to the really real. It is "seen," believed and meant to be true. Hence the theme "Jesus Christ—the life of the world" may be said to be confessional in this "objective" sense, which literally means that reality which presents itself before us.

In the same manner we need to be clear with regard to another point here: to say, "Jesus Christ—the life of the world" is more than a mere metaphorical way of speaking. Bread, for example, is metaphorical; so also water, when applied to Jesus to bring out His significance and meaning. But life cannot be said to be a metaphor in the same sense, especially when it is used to qualify a metaphor:

³ For a treatment of some of these questions, see O. V. Jathanna, *The Decisiveness of the Christ-event and the Universality of Christianity in a World of Religious Plurality: With Special Reference to Hendrik Kraemer and Alfred George Hogg as well as to William Ernest Hocking and Pandipedi Chenchiah*, Berne: Peter Lang, 1981.

life-giving bread (bread of life) and living water. If we like we may call it an "intensive metaphor." I think it is the biblical way of referring to a reality which is more than literal (i.e., referring to reality-merely-as-it-is), but also more than merely metaphorical. It refers to what is transcendentally and eschatologically real—i.e., in view of reality-as-it-should-be and reality-as-it-will-be, and in the proleptic even of Christ reality-as-it-already-is. To me this is the significance of the hyphen in between "Jesus Christ" and "the life of the world." For it allows us to understand it both as "Jesus Christ *is* already the life of the world," and as "He *will be* the life of the world" in a more intensive as well as perceptible manner.

Before proceeding further we need to take note of yet one other point. In the sub-heading we said that this article will be an Indian Christian understanding, which means that this is an attempt to understand Jesus as the life of the world in an Indian context. But here the term "Indian context" is not to be understood in a rigid manner as referring to any one particular school of traditional thinking, or a modern ideology. The Indian context today is a synthetic one. It is in the making. It is going through a process. It is dynamic and not static. And no one particular strand will suffice to do justice to it. Without denying certain specific advantages in trying to relate the Christian faith to this or that school of Indian thinking, this article holds the view that the reflections of an Indian Christian are *de facto* modern Indian, insofar as he or she is alive to the issues and problems that the present day India faces, and is truly concerned about them. The one who is born and brought up in India today breathes modern Indian atmosphere at every point, and there is no need for any artificial make-up in order to appear more Indian. The idea that from the very outset we have to prop up our Indianness is something that has been imposed on us from outside, and is more psychological than anything else. We are not less Indian than other Indians. Thereby I do not intend to say that there is no need for us to go deeper into the Indian religious-cultural heritage. But this is a need for all, and not merely for Christians. Shedding this psychological log from our mind, I submit, is an imperative for a creative and healthy development of Indian Christian thinking today.

A number of Indian Christian theologians indeed have paid attention to Jesus as the giver of life in various ways and manners.

A. J. Appasamy's work *What is Moksha?* has the significant subtitle, *A Study in the Johannine Doctrine of Life*.⁴ Pandipeddi Chenchiah's Christology and Soteriology cannot be understood without his concept of "cosmic evolution of life" which he says has been effected by the coming of Jesus, the New Man.⁵ Among the contemporary theologians various aspects of this theme are taken up: Dr M. M. Thomas' concern for the penultimate and the process of humanization,⁶ Dr Samartha's emphasis on the historical,⁷ and Dr Chandran's vision of a Christo-centric new humanity which is rooted in Christ's life,⁸ all demonstrate this. It may, however, be pointed out that among our contemporaries no one has yet taken up the theme under discussion as the centre of his or her theological reconstruction in India.

After these preliminary remarks we should now ask, what it means to say, "Jesus Christ—the life of the world," and what is its significance in the Indian religio-cultural matrix?⁹

III

This confession means to me above all a high Christology. To say that Jesus Christ is and will be the life of the world is to confess that He is none other than God-Incarnate. This is not an externally imposed interpretation, but is necessary to understand the full

⁴ Madras: CLS, 1931.

⁵ P. Chenchiah, "Who is Jesus? (A Study of Jesus in Terms of the Creative Process)," *The Guardian* 1943, July 29, pp. 252,253, August 5, pp. 364,365, August 12, pp. 377, 378, August 19, pp. 389, 392.

⁶ M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization*, Madras: CLS, 1971, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, Madras: CLS, 1975.

⁷ S. J. Samartha, "The Modern View of History," *Religion and Society* VI. 3 (Oct. 1979), pp. 24-40; Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, Madras: CLS, 1974, pp. 145-168.

⁸ See: Samuel Amirtham, *A Vision for Man: Essays in Honour of Joshua Russell Chandran*, Madras: CLS, 1978.

⁹ At this point we need to bear in mind that in the process of actual thought and reflection there can be no clear-cut distinction between the meaning of something, and its implications for a given situation. For they are interwoven. But it is a matter of expediency to present the thought in an orderly manner. For this reason here I choose first to look into the meaning of the assertion, "Jesus Christ—the life of the world," and then to present its implications for the Indian context.

magnitude of what is implied by this assertion itself. This could not have been otherwise in the ears of those who first heard and understood Jesus as saying: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), and "I am the bread of life. . . . I am the living bread that came down from heaven" (John 6:48, 51, NIV). For the Jews were well acquainted with the Old Testament which sees God and God alone as the source of all life. It is God and He alone who can be said to be the life of the world. The Torah, to be sure, was deemed the bringer of life; but only as a channel. It did not have life in itself. In John Jesus is not just saying that He is the channel of the Life Divine, but He is the Life Divine. This is also what the Evangelist says in the Prologue: "In him was life and the life was the light of men" (1:4). Again: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. . . . For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:21, 26). This certainly implies much more than the idea that Jesus is only a channel of the Life Divine. This is also evidenced by the fact that Jesus says that the Scriptures, the channel of the Life Divine, point to Jesus, who is the life (John 5:39-40). Peter refers to Jesus as the "Author of life" (Acts 3:15). These ideas are not wholly foreign to Paul. His whole theological thrust presupposes the belief in Jesus as the giver of life (cf. Colossians 3:4; 2 Corinthians 4:10-11). This belief was not the result of mere speculation by the early Church, but was the necessary result of the events of Jesus' resurrection and the presence of the resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit, who came down on the believers on the day of Pentecost.

But the New Testament understanding of Jesus as the life goes beyond this in that Jesus is seen as the life, not only in His relation to God in the act of redemption, but also in the act of creation (John 1:3, 10; Colossians 1:16-17). Thus this assertion brings out the decisiveness of Christ and the Christ-event clearly.

In order to understand what this assertion really means, it is necessary to consider, though briefly, the New Testament understanding of life. The life that Jesus gives is the *zoe aionios*. It is not a mere immortality, a mere continuation and prolongation of the earthly life without an end. It is much more than this. It is not a mere matter of quantity, but of quality. What He offers to us is

participation in the very life of God—the Life Divine (cf. Ephesians 4:18). It is growing into God. Since God is infinite, this growing will also be infinite. As sharing in God's very life, it cannot but be life in abundance (John 10:10). The New Testament understands this as the life of the age to come, that is as an eschatological reality. Since in, through, and around Jesus Christ this eschaton has proleptically entered history, this life is available to those who come into fellowship with Jesus Christ, and abide in Him (John 15:1-5). This is understood in Paul as a new creation, the transformation and consummation of the old (2 Corinthians 5:17. See further 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1).

If Jesus is the life in this sense, then He cannot but have a cosmic significance and relevance. Hence the genitive "of the world" only makes explicit what is already implicit in the very understanding of "Jesus Christ—the life." I understand this genitive as an objective genitive, and prefer to render it to mean "for the world." Jesus as the life, as the giver of life of the coming age, cannot belong to any one race, nation, group, culture or a particular epoch. His significance is universal. He is decisive for all, in all ages. The early Church had to learn this truth after receiving much illumination from the Holy Spirit, and it could happen only in stages. The Acts of the Apostles bears witness to the fact that the Holy Spirit had to intervene at decisive moments in the history of the early Church so that this universal dimension would not be forgotten, but would be borne in mind, and acted upon. The early Church, therefore, had to fight the tendency to deem Jesus Christ the Lord of one small group, belonging to one race, nation and language, and the desire to enjoy the new life only for themselves. God sent Jesus for the sake of the whole world, out of His invincible love for it (John 3:16). In the economy of salvation the role of Jesus is decisive. This truth becomes clear not only when we view the central acts of God in, through and around Jesus Christ, in their totality, but even individually: incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension and His coming again as the universal judge all depict irrepeatable and irreplaceable events in and for history.

It is not only true that Jesus as the life is decisive for all, but since this decisiveness has an event character, there is a need to communicate this to the whole world, for which it is meant. Again to quote

John: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). Herein lies the secret of the Christian mission, as well as its necessity. This shows how wrong are those who regard the Christian mission as an off-shoot of colonialism. Mission during the colonial period was one kind of missionary enterprise, with varying degree of relationship to the respective colonial governments. But the Christian mission in its core has nothing to do with colonialism. It is the very opposite of any colonial greed, and thine-is-mine attitude. Christian mission is borne out of knowledge that Jesus is the life of the world who has brought the life of the coming age, and of love which will not let those who have seen this life keep it only for themselves, but urges them to share it with others: a mine-is-also-thine attitude.

In order to have life, which Jesus offers, there is a need to know about Jesus as the life of the world. For without believing in Him, that is, without coming into right relationship with Him, and living in His fellowship, the life of Jesus cannot be truly and fully communicated. For it is not an automatic process; it has an offer-response structure. It is not mechanical. One can only, as was pointed out above, grow into it. "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Knowing in the Bible is not a mere theoretical knowledge. It is not propositional but relational. It is knowing-in-fellowship.

God created man in His own image, so that man can live in God's fellowship and share in His life and be God's partner. Owing to this, man's being has an open structure: it is open towards God to its very core. It is an openness towards the unending new possibilities into which God calls him. In this structure being and becoming, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other, are held together. New knowledge-in-fellowship opens up new possibilities on the subjective level, as a result of God opening up new possibilities on the objective (i.e. *extro nos*) level. But for a responsible, spontaneous and creative development-in-relationship both these aspects are equally important.

To confess that Jesus Christ is and will be the life of the world, therefore, necessarily involves becoming the instruments of making Jesus Christ, the life of the world, known to the world, and becoming

the sign and instrument (*signum et instrumentum*) of this life in the world. Since Jesus Christ is the life, the sphere of this witness-bearing is as wide and as deep as life itself. And this life is not confined to the earthly voyage, but transcends its shores and goes beyond. Hence our witness-bearing should not become "one-dimensional"¹⁰ either in terms of this world alone or other-world alone, or again in terms of mere socio-economic or mere spiritual concern. It cannot be confined either to the level of thought or of activities alone. Life is much wider than any of these, and includes all these. In the first place life is to be *lived*. Neither thought, nor activity, nor contemplation can exhaust it.

IV

After dwelling on the meaning and significance of the assertion "Jesus Christ—the life of the world" for a while, we need now to turn to consider briefly the significance and the implications of this assertion in the present day Indian context. Here I do not wish to make any clear-cut distinctions between the religio-philosophical and socio-ethical issues, since they, in fact, are interwoven and inter-related.

The confession "Jesus Christ—the life of the world" has a tremendous amount of "challenging relevance" in the Indian context, and it offers, at various points, a much-needed corrective to both belief and practice in Indian society at large. This I wish to state as follows:

1) This confession implies that we are not self-existent, eternal beings in essence, but owe our existence to the gracious creative initiative of the Creator God, and Jesus, the Agent and Goal of Creation. As living beings we also depend on him for subsistence and sustenance. This is not an entirely unknown idea in India, but it is not allowed to permeate the whole of Indian thought and practice. This certainly makes a difference in our attitude to life. Our life is a gift of God and should be lived accordingly. We hold it in stewardship. It is not our own making. But since it is a gift to us from our loving Father, who sent "His only begotten Son" in order to give us new life in abundance, we can live it fully and enjoy it for the glory

¹⁰ I owe this concept to Prof. J. M. Lochman of Basel.

of God, and for the benefit of others as well as ourselves. The characteristic feature of our life should, therefore, be gratitude, happiness and a sense of responsibility.

2) Since in Jesus Christ we have the source, essence and goal of life, this life cannot be a nexus of retribution for the *karmic* deeds of the forgotten past, nor be a case of a cosmic accident. It cannot also be a matter of a capricious play of fate, or a lucky (or unlucky) fall of the dice. If Jesus is the life, then it should be characterised by the teleology which Jesus so clearly displayed both through His teachings and life. In a country where fatalism, pessimism and resignation tend to rule supreme these days, this assertion is of tremendous significance.

3) This assertion also implies that all human beings have the same source, essence and goal of life, and there can be no discrimination of class, colour, caste or creed. This shows that we need to grow into one family, both within the country, and outside the country, without any barrier. This coming together is possible because the goal is not a mere impersonal principle, an idea, a mere utopia or some kind of undifferentiated, uncreated state of being. It is a coming together in a true community under the leadership of one Lord, to share in Life Divine. For this reason, Jesus as the life of the world did not proclaim an individualistic salvation, but the Kingdom of God, and as its nucleus, sign and instrument, he brought forth the Church.

4) This also demands that we should hold life to be sacred. However, the entire creation tradition of the Old Testament and its laws, on the one hand, and the implications of the incarnation of Christ, on the other hand make it abundantly clear that human life is qualitatively different from all other forms of life, and human life cannot be deemed just one such form of life. This is a good example to show that it is not enough to pick up certain phrases and predicates, and then interpret them independently; we should take the whole of theology, the whole of the revelatory tradition, into consideration to elucidate its proper meaning. All life is good, but there are different levels of life and non-human life is created by God especially for the benefit of human beings, the crown of God's creation. Two things are implied by this: negatively, this should not mean that man is at liberty to use the rest of the creation as he

pleases, and that he can brutally exploit it as he likes. Certainly not! It has been already pointed out that both man's own life, and the rest of the creation which he inhabits are gifts of God, and he is a steward. He has also been given the responsibility of preserving them. In the face of the ecological crisis today, about which India has not yet become sufficiently aware, the faith that all kinds of life come from God and were created through Jesus Christ—the life of the world—has important consequences. Positively, this implies that all human beings share in the same life, and stand above other forms of life. They are created in the image of God, and are called to share in the Life Divine in a very special way distinct from the rest of creation. This truth should help us recognize the dignity of human beings in a land where a cow, a mouse or a monkey seem to be honoured more than a Harijan!

5) Jesus is life, and not a mere principle of survival. Hence not a mere survival, but a fullness of life should be the goal for all human beings. This should apply to all spheres of human life. All people should be given equal opportunities to become open to the possibilities that God has set before them without the impediments that the unjust social structures, and self-centred individuals create.

6) Jesus is the life of the world as God-Incarnate, as true God and true man. This shows the sacredness of the bodily life. Man's life is not a disembodied one: life means bodily life. The Christian belief in the resurrection is in this respect very significant. It is not without reason that the Apostles' Creed confesses "the resurrection of the body" and "the life everlasting" together. Thus, this assertion warns us against the tendency to exaggerate the life of the spirit and interiority, to the neglect of the physical aspects of human life, and upholds the sanctity of the human body against all brutalities and physical abuse about which we hear so much both inside and outside India these days.

7) If Jesus is the life, "its source, essence and goal,"¹¹ then we do not have any right to take either the lives of others, or our own. Murder and suicide for these reasons are equally wrong. This raises

¹¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, London: Collins (Fontana), 1963, pp. 155-158, 216-222.

sharply the questions of euthanasia, abortion, war and capital punishment. These questions should be differentiated from each other since they do not simply belong to one general category, and the issues are sometimes rather elusive. But here also the principle of judgment should be the same, that life is a gift of God, and should be treated accordingly in the best way possible, taking the total situation into consideration.

8) To assert that Jesus is the life of the world is to imply that the true goal of life can be realized only by following Jesus and accepting the truth, the value and the goal that He revealed as the way to the true fulfilment of life. He revealed that the true essence of life lies in love—love that is willing to suffer for others. He also revealed that the natural life is not merely an end in itself, but is also a means to a higher end, that is, to the new life that God offers, a life which is open to the new possibilities of God. This is because the actual life has, owing to sin, become a perversion of true life—life in a right relationship with the “source, essence and goal of life.” Jesus revealed a life of true harmony and joy, which is derived from the life of forgiveness of sins, and of being conscious of this forgiveness (Luke 7:44-47).

9) Finally, this assertion also implies that Jesus as the life of the world is also active in the world, and we should become open to His activities in the world. We must be willing to learn from God’s activities in the world, both in the religious and non-religious spheres of life. In order to discern this, however, we need the biblical revelation in and through which God revealed His will more clearly and deeply than anywhere else, especially in and through the act of the Word becoming flesh for the sake of giving life to the world.

This confession which is at the same time an assertion, then, means that we cannot just consider this at an intellectual level, discuss it, formulate the questions and answers, and leave it at that. Jesus as the life of the world affects our life, and the life of the whole world. To say that Jesus is the life is at the same time to acknowledge that, apart from Him and His ways, there can be no true life, but only death and its various manifestations and ramifications. This confession, therefore, includes in itself both the need for a commitment and also a mission: to “receive” life, to “enter into” life and to communicate this life to others.

This, however, is not a triumphalistic, imperialistic battle cry, as was made clear above. We cannot sufficiently stress the New Testament truth that Jesus the life became the life of the world by pouring out His life for the sake of the world. The good news of God is that God gave His Son, and Jesus gave away His life as a "ransom" for the liberation of all. He is the life of the world, not merely as the agent of creation, as the resurrected One, or as the life-giving Spirit, but equally as the Crucified. Jesus the life of the world became its life in a new and special way by giving His life to the world and by sharing it with the world.

At this point, we, the members of the world-wide Christian community, need to become more self-critical as regards different epochs of our institutional history. We have to confess that at various points we have not always stood by the side of life, and thereby have miserably failed to enhance the cause of Jesus Christ, the life of the world. Whatever the cause, we cannot condone our failures. We should be committed to Jesus Christ, the life of the world, and to His cause, which has its essence in self-giving love. Hence we need to come to the presence of God-in-Christ in repentance for our failures, and to seek to live our life for the liberation and transformation of the world with a new dedication.

This also makes it incumbent upon us that we gratefully acknowledge the services rendered to preserve and enrich life in various ways and manners, fragmentary though they may be, both in the religious and secular spheres of life, whether we can always agree with the underlying philosophy or ideology of it all or not. To this, however, belongs also the prophetic ministry of speaking in the Name of Christ, the life of the world, against all forces—both in the religious and secular spheres—that go against life, both natural and eschatological.

It is at the same time also incumbent upon us to give an account of our confession, and to work out an adequate answer to show as clearly as possible to the world why we make this assertion that Jesus is *the* life of the world, and how Jesus can be truly the life of the whole world, for all human beings. This will happen in a process, for we shall ever grow in knowledge, as we grow more and more into the life of Jesus. When we live the life, thought will be able to think, on the basis of the life that is lived. For thought is a receptive

thinking which seeks to understand and interpret reality that reveals itself in the context of life, and it does not occur in a vacuum. There is no such thing as pure thought. Thus when we truly live the life of Christ we shall become increasingly able to think about it more clearly, and communicate it more credibly and effectively, and thereby help the world more readily to share the Life Divine in the fellowship of Jesus Christ—the Life of the World.