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The Church of South India—Its Challenge
The Church of South India to an Outsider
Church Union in North India
The Syrian Church
Evangelism in India
Theology for a Missionary Church
The Indian Ecumenical Study Conference—
Findings
The Church and the Social Challenge
Responsible Society
Contemporary Democracy
Book Reviews

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Responsible Society

Findings of the Conference

The responsible society has been defined as one in which the freedom of men is the freedom of men who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and in which those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and to the people whose welfare is affected by it. The responsible society is a somewhat different conception from any theories of society enunciated by the Church in the past. For we must recognize that the Church, concerning which we use such splendid language, and which points us to heaven, is phenomenally, involved in the relativities of history and of social circumstances. Thus if there be a need for a theology of society, there is also a need for a sociology of religion.

It is significant that in the past, for example, forms of catholicism have been connected with a feudal ordering of society. This finds expression in a close union of an organic nature in which several 'estates' are bound together in a complex relationship of custom, traditions, rights and duties maintained by the authority of the Church and a peculiar system of land ownership. This system is not dissimilar in some respects to the social order which once existed in India, but is differentiated from Hindu society by the predominance of the Church which always provided in some degree a court of appeal. In this hierarchical scheme the Church claimed and achieved lordship over the State.

We find the antithesis to this in Protestantism. The organic union is broken up and new sects and denominations emerge in which we can see one aspect of the rise of individualism so that a close connection is developed between the new Christian individual and the rising middle class. At the same time capitalism represented a new type of ownership of the means of production. Closely associated with this is the emergence of State power and an erastian conception of the Church which in its extreme form regards the Church as little more than a ministry of State for religious affairs. The result has been that whole areas of life cease to be regarded as in any sense the concern of the Church, which tended to accept a pietistic outlook. The revolutionary situation in which we now find ourselves demands a new synthesis. But the social situation varies from country to country. Even in America, State interference has modified the old *laissez faire* capitalism; the welfare state in England has created a new set of problems, and the Communist countries yet others. In every case there has been a very real rediscovery of the nature of the Church, both in its theological essence and also in a growing sense of responsibility for the whole of life—a new organic approach.

Criticism as a Function of the Church

This must inevitably lead to the use of criticism as a necessary function of the Church's life and witness; a critique first of all of capitalism, which is seen to be liberty of a kind which leads easily to anarchy or to injustice as exemplified in large scale unemployment or wastage of the fruits of production as in the prewar period, or today, in the maintenance of large-scale armament partly to bolster economic prosperity. But it also leads to a critique of collectivism as tending to a denial of freedom. Herein lies the problem: the necessity of holding the tension between the authority and order necessary to prevent the breakdown of society into chaos on the one hand and on the other, the maintenance of the organs of freedom without which a responsible society cannot exist. Thus, the responsible society will negate a liberty which endangers justice in the economic sense and an authority which endangers freedom.

Today, the whole problem has moved towards a further stage of development. The vast increase in technology which can be employed for constructive or destructive purposes, the substitution of the State or of State-controlled agencies for the individual employer or the phenomenon of monopoly, and the vast increase of economic devices such as price and currency control lead to an enquiry as to where true responsibility is to be found. Karl Mannheim in his *Man and Society* asks the fundamental question, 'Who will plan the planners?' It is possible for workers who feel that they are exploited to combine against an employer or at least to criticize him. But it is far more difficult for them to take effective action against a Board or some impersonal structure of this kind or against the State itself. Against this background, let us relate what we have said to the situation in India today.

The Indian Situation

1. Social thought in the Church is very retarded. Catholics find it easy to criticize capitalism but are suspicious of those who would alter existing arrangements for the ownership of land and tend to a self-righteous condemnation of Communism. Protestants are inclined to identify the Church with a middle class attitude to life or to retreat into pietism or an apocalyptic sectarianism. There is need for the most radical scrutiny of our social philosophy and the Biblical basis for a critique of actual society in India today and a most careful factual analysis.

2. It is important to point out that communism is a symptom and not the disease itself. The real conflict is not in Communism *versus* capitalism but in the mechanization and psychological conditioning of man *versus* the responsible society.

3. There is the problem of the unfinished revolution. India is still faced with the decadent remnants of feudalism. This involves a radical approach to such questions as land tenure and the fundamental rights of the person. We must not forget that there are places in India where cultivators have hardly emerged from the position of serfs. India is bound to suggest to Western friends who had their more-or-less violent revolutions a century or so ago, that they should show some

understanding of the social travail through which this country is bound to pass for some time to come.

4. India is also displaying many of the symptoms of the technological age, e.g. the growing tendency towards centralization, both political and economic, with the consequent vast increase of bureaucracy. One cannot but note also the remarkable growth in the population of the larger cities during and since the last war. This is partly but not entirely the result of the influx of refugees from Pakistan. And so India, like other countries, has to face the problems of what Mumford calls 'megalopolis'. These 'conurbations', that is, large aggregates of population in ever widening urban areas, are rootless, communityless and easily become prey to anti-social forces, and it is in these cities that tendencies towards nihilism or at best, social corruption and cynicism, can so easily be produced and then infect the countryside. We cannot escape the challenge of this situation by continuing to insist that India is, after all, a country of villages, though that also is true. For the political life and power of the country, its guiding ideas, its colleges, newspapers and dominant ideologies are fashioned in the cities where men have lost the sense of community. On the other hand, in rural areas, such forms of community as survive, are to a great extent relics of an earlier type of society and no longer fulfil their original purpose.

This is particularly demonstrated by the strange sense in which the word 'community' is employed in India. Whereas the sociologist regards community as 'an area of common living', in India, it has come to mean a closed group of a religious or quasi-religious character. This failure to develop effective new forms of community to deal with the changing character of Indian society, when accompanied as it is by the development of new techniques, is a very serious factor in the general social situation. The Amsterdam Conference pointed out that 'centres of initiative in economic life must be so encouraged as to avoid placing too great a burden upon centralized judgement and decision'. The responsible society involves the participation of the person, of the family and of small groups and communities and it may be necessary to discourage the 'trend toward bigness' so that persons are no puppets of a distant bureaucracy. This may involve the breaking up of many large irresponsible and centralized structures into more manageable responsible units. But this does not mean that there should not be large-scale development in such matters as irrigation schemes which demand a large area for successful planning and which are quite beyond the economic resources of the smaller units. But it does mean that there should be experiment in the development of rural factories and industries which are decentralized and de-urbanized. At the same time, it is necessary to develop more effective rural townships which can become centres for the social and welfare activities of a whole rural neighbourhood.

5. This emphasis on smaller units also demands a new emphasis on voluntary associations. From the secular point of view the Church itself is a voluntary association and it is doubtful whether there can be a responsible society which is not 'pluralist', that is to say, that between the individual and the State, there should be a whole series of subsidiary groups with a real vitality and autonomy. Such an outlook, if made a basis of planning, could take much of the sting out of the present

demand for linguistic states or for regionalism because every kind of diversity can be welcomed, if it be regarded as a means of enriching the whole of society which should not be standardized. If such demands are disregarded, the inevitable result may well be separatist movements and consequent disruption.

6. The problem of the secular State must be analyzed. One may say that in India today there is no one more fitted to define and to vitalize the conception of the secular State than the Christians. There is a very great difference between a secular State and a secular society. It is possible to have a thoroughly secular State in a deeply religious society. What is meant by a secular State is a State in which real religious freedom and real respect for the conscience are accepted by all. If the secular State is to be a reality in India, Christians must not only demand full freedom for the propagation of the faith, but play a lively part in the general life of society. There is a tendency for Christians to live in a kind of 'ghetto'. That is to say, to take shelter within the walls of their own community or compound. Christians must learn to initiate activities and schemes for social welfare and social change which may be adopted by men of goodwill even if they do not accept the faith which inspires such activities. This also applies to political parties and municipal government. For example in the name of the secular State, Christians might well protest against the mentioning of religious communities in any State document or in the lists of candidates in an election, and should avoid any suggestion that one votes for one's own 'community' without a reference to programmes or principles.

7. There is great need for experiment. Intensive thought needs to be given to discovering means to alleviate the mass poverty which continues to be India's greatest problem. In her life the Church must study seriously the relation of theology to social action and the social implication of eucharistic and other kinds of worship, the rich significance of the Biblical teaching on social and economic justice and its relevance to actual conditions in India today. The teaching of the Church at various periods should be critically explored and if necessary reinterpreted in terms of our present situation. But the greatest challenge of all is the need for identification with the under-privileged in town and country. If the responsible society is to be a reality, men must be responsible. This involves repentance and a reorientation of life which has a social as well as a moral or personal content, and it will result in a sense of need for further education and a lively sense of the dignity of the person. In this respect trade unions or peasant unions, can be of immense spiritual significance, but it is essential to develop an effective working class leadership, and this means that one of the most important forms of activity in which a Christian can take part is working class education so that the workers may be increasingly equipped not only to fight for their rights, but to play a significant part in the transformation of the country. The fact remains that our city churches are predominantly middle class in determination and our village churches so desperately poor that they are absorbed in the sheer struggle for existence. It is not enough to do a little social work in a spirit of patronage. We need to develop something equivalent to the movement of the priest workmen in France where preaching or evangelism is preceded by identifications with life situations. It is only

from below that the situation may be transformed. This will only happen when men are filled with the spirit of the incarnate Christ who for our sakes became poor and dwelt among us.

Our discussion involved much consideration of the problem of corruption and it is so easy to be merely cynical and negative, enjoying the revelations of scandal mongers. Again the clue lies in identification with people so that we, with them, may learn to withstand the insidious forces of social decay and personal sinfulness that leads to corruption. But at the same time, we must examine the defects in the social system which encourage it. We must not say that all that is needed is the conversion of the individual because even the best individual cannot be fully responsible in a bad society. The fruit of lives changed by the influence of the spirit of Christ must be seen in a social life that is revolutionized and in the transformation of social institutions. In this way personal evangelism and social revolution must be integrally linked together.



Hence belief in Jesus Christ by men in their various cultures always means belief in God. No one can know the Son without acknowledging the Father. To be related in devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points. As Son of God he points away from the many values of man's social life to the One who alone is good; from many powers which men use and on which they depend to the One who alone is powerful; from the many times and seasons of history with their hopes and fears to the One who is Lord of all times and is alone to be feared and hoped for; he points away from all that is conditioned to the Unconditioned. He does not direct attention away from this world to another; but from all worlds, present and future, material and spiritual, to the One who creates all worlds, who is the Other of all worlds.—H. Richard Niebuhr in *Christ and Culture*.