



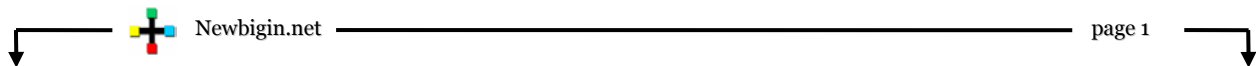
Salvation, the New Humanity and Cultural-Communal Solidarity

1973

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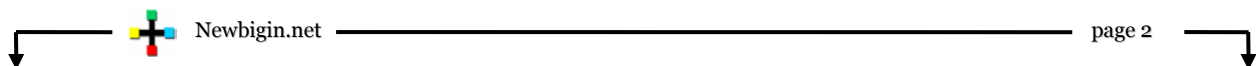


I

I must begin by saying that this title was given to me. It was not my choice. The complexity and length of the title is a true indication of the complexity and range of the issues raised. I can do no more than try to think aloud about these issues, hoping that these thoughts may stimulate further discussion and greater clarity.

Let me begin with the last phrase of the title: 'cultural-communal solidarity'. This points to the very important fact that our humanness is related to our membership in some kind of group. Human beings are not identical and replaceable monads, like billiard balls. We become human only by inter-acting with other human beings. A baby would not grow into a human being without the loving relationship of a mother, of other members of the family, and later of friends, colleagues, fellow-workers. Of course we are also part of the larger human family, but the fact remains that our becoming and remaining human is bound up with a pattern of relationships which we share with the members of our own family and social group. To imagine that we can be human in a way which eliminates all these immediate relationships is to be the victim of academic illusion.

And yet these relationships do not suffice to make us fully human beings. The word 'human' stands for the whole family of mankind, and is misused if it is used to denote something less.



One of the meanings of the word 'salvation' is 'making whole'. The English word is connected with the original Sanskrit root *sarva*, expressing the idea of wholeness. We are familiar with the fact that the same Greek word in the Gospels is sometimes translated 'sav' and sometimes 'make whole'. One way of describing salvation is to say that it is the making whole of all things, the uniting of all things with Jesus as their Head (Eph. 1:10). The purpose of God in Christ, according

to St. Paul, is to make one new man, in whom there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave or free—and therefore neither Nadar nor Vellala nor Adi-Dravida.

The conflict between the issues raised in the last two paragraphs is at the heart of our discussion. How is our total salvation in Christ related to these smaller patterns of relationships in family, community, nation—without which we are not fully human?

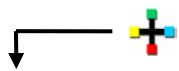
II

At this point we have to look at the central phrase in our title—'new humanity'. This concept of the new humanity as the goal of the Christian mission has moved into the centre of discussion since the Uppsala Assembly of the World Council of Churches. The Report of Section II of that Assembly says that there is a 'burning relevance' in speaking of the Christian mission in terms of humanisation. Why is this so? Why has 'humanisation' become a burning issue? Why does one of our out-standing contemporary theologians have to write a book on *The Power to be Human*?¹ Are we not human already? Why has our human-ness become a problem? A recent German writer has said: 'We are all humanists nowadays: whether we are human is another question'.² That is exactly the point; we are humanists because we are not sure whether we are human. But why has our human-ness become a problem?

There is no simple answer to that question. But there are three areas of experience which throw light on it.

¹ Charles West. *The Power to be Human*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

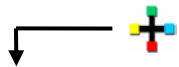
² Heinz Zahrnt. 'Wozu ist das Christentum gut?'



1. There is the situation of the typical city dweller in one of the 'developed' societies. His problem is that he does not live in one world but in a plurality of different worlds. A farmer living in a village in Tamilnadu lives his life in one world. He is held in a stable pattern of relationships with the same people—whether at work, at school, with neighbours, when he goes to the market or when he goes to the temple. Because he is held in a stable network of human relationships, his identity is secure. Everyone knows who he is, and he knows himself. Indeed the question 'Who am I' simply does not occur. Contrast with this the situation of the typical middle class professional man in a 'developed' society. Here there is no such stable network of relations. At work, in his neighbourhood, in his leisure pursuits, he is meeting different sets of people. In each relationship he has a different identity. His office colleagues are not known to his neighbours, and none of them are known to the people with whom he spends his leisure. Moreover the relationships in which he is involved are not given to him; he chooses them. He decides whom he will visit, with whom he will talk on the telephone, and what programmes he will watch on his television screen. He creates a world according to his own tastes--or rather a series of worlds. He probably changes his job every five years, and with it his place of residence. Each change means a change of neighbours. And in more and more cases he is denied even the stability of a nuclear family, for he is quite likely to change his wife as often as he changes his job. There is no stable network of relationships. In each of these he has a different identity, and the question 'Who am I?' becomes a burning question. This is one area in which the question of the meaning of our human-ness becomes acute.

2. A second and quite different area is opened up by the following testimony which forms part of the Report of Section I of the Bangkok conference.

In my country a white shop assistant smiles at her white customers, her face alive and alert. When she turns to me her face and her eyes go blank and she sees not a person but a black. Only by resisting, by fighting back can I relate to her—and so I quarrel with her. I even hate her. But as a Christian I have to go beyond hate to the love that involves suffering, forgiveness and reconciliation.



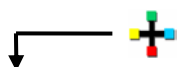
Racial and cultural rejection can create a situation in which the human-ness of a human being is denied, and the only possible response is some kind of initiative whether violent or non-violent which affirms 'I am a human being, in spite of your denial'. Black Theology is an expression in one field of experience. But we do not need to go so far afield to find examples. In Madras one of our Sextons said recently: 'My Pastor has not yet discovered that I am a human being'. For millions of people in many different situations of this kind, the question of 'the power to be human' has become a burning question.

3. There is a third and totally different way in which the problem of what it means to be human is being forced upon us. Developments in science and technology during the last two decades seem at several points to threaten our humanity. With the advance of modern computer technology it is possible to undertake the planning of human affairs on a scale and with a degree of detail which was unthinkable before the age of the computer. There are real dangers that the dignity of the human person may be denied in this process. Attempts are made to reduce human language to the level at which a computer can translate it from one language to another, involving the danger that the computer becomes the master of human thinking instead of its servant. Finally there are developments in the field of biochemistry which open up the possibilities of manipulating and altering the human personality, and even of the selective breeding of human beings by means of cloning to produce large numbers of identical human beings for various different functions. These developments raise in a nightmare form the question of what it means to be a human being, and of how technology can remain the servant of truly human purposes and not become a monster which destroys the human person.

I have indicated three areas, unrelated to each other, on which the problem of being human has become acute. No doubt there are others which could be listed. But even these three raise sufficiently complicated problems.

For example :

—the 'lost' city dweller longs for the security and stability of village life, but the village boy longs for the anonymity and freedom which life in a big city gives, even if it means hunger and want;



—the man whose humanity is denied by an oppressive group may have to affirm his humanity by violence, but he knows that in the end both the oppressor and the oppressed have somehow to live together on this fragile and over-crowded spaceship, the earth;

—even as we guard ourselves against the possible dehumanisation involved in the increased use of technology, we know that the human race faces disaster if it does not find better ways of large-scale planning.

If we come now to look at our situation in India, it seems to me that none of the three factors which I have listed is the key factor. Our problem, I think is not that of the United States or that of Southern Africa. The great strength and toughness of family and caste and community in India ensure that the individual has an assurance of acceptance by a group. The 'identity crisis' is not a feature of our culture—not yet, at any rate. Our problem is a different one : it is that our identity is defined too narrowly. Even if we get beyond thinking of ourselves as Nadars, Vellalas, Europeans etc., we all still identify ourselves in terms of the Indian Christian 'community'. And —this is the

problem this does not mean that our identity is defined in terms of Jesus Christ, his living and dying and rising; rather it is defined in terms of a social group with certain traditions, privileges, and customs—a group which tends, like all human groups, to seek its own corporate advancement. We all know what I am talking about, and I do not need to enlarge upon these brief indications.

The problem is that we are finding our identity in other terms than those indicated to us by the New Testament. We are not recognisable as the new humanity of which Paul speaks when he says that as in Adam all died so in Christ shall all be made alive. The 'Christian community' does not represent this. It is not a body of people who find their identity simply through their response to Jesus. Even when they set out to evangelise, what too often happens is not the re-making of men in the image of Jesus, but their remaking in the image of the Indian Christian community. Our problem may thus be stated as follows. A community in which men and women know themselves accepted and supported is essential for becoming human; but on the other hand a limited and close-knit community is antithetical to the full development of the new humanity in the

image of Jesus. How can there be a community which both nurtures the human-ness of its members and also leads them forward into the fulness of the New Man?

III

One way of approaching the problem is that which makes use of the concept of 'indigenisation'. To those who follow this way, the Indian Christian community is seen as a foreign enclave, seeking its identity in something which is alien to the indigenous culture and therefore unable to play its proper part in the development of the nation. According to this line of thinking, there must be a distinction made between the elements in the Christian tradition which concern the central revelation of God in Jesus Christ, about which there can be no compromise, and those elements which are social and cultural, which are the accidental embodiment taken by the Gospel in the course of its passage through various cultures, and which can therefore be discarded or adapted to suit the cultural idiom of India. But this runs into several difficulties. For example:

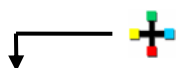
1. The implication is that there is a 'culture-free' core of religious truth which can then be 'adapted' to various cultural situations. This has only to be stated to be dismissed. Every human activity, including the human activity in which Christians see the decisive action of God, is culturally conditioned. In fact the language of 'indigenisation' has often been used by those who were blind to the cultural conditioning of their own expressions of the faith and failed to see that their own religion was already the result of a very far-reaching process of 'indigenisation'.

2. How does one decide where to draw the boundary line between what is religious and what is cultural? The conflict between Robert de Nobili and his Franciscan opponents turned on this point. In a 'sacral society', such as the India of the 16th and 17th centuries was, can it be said that any of the Indian customs which de Nobili accepted were purely social and cultural, without religious significance? The Lutheran missionaries of the 18th century regarded caste as a purely social matter having nothing to do with the Gospel; their 19th century successors were convinced that caste was a work of the devil, and therefore

forced their Brahmin converts to eat beef and drink beer in order to prove that they had renounced it. But it is at least arguable that this conviction of the young missionaries of that era owed more to the French Revolution than to a fresh study of the New Testament. When H. A. Krishna Pillai was baptised he refused to have his *kudumi* shaved off, in spite of the insistence of his missionary mentors that it was a religious symbol; which side was right, and how do you decide?

3. In a culturally pluriform society, such as India certainly is, how do you prevent the lineaments of the New Man in Christ being completely obscured by the divisions between the groups which have 'indigenised' in different sectors of the culture? Should you argue, as Donald McGavran seems to do, that you should encourage each cultural group to develop its own distinct form of Christianity, so that—for example—you have in Madras City congregations for Nadars, for Vellals, for Adi-Dravidas, etc.?

4. It is arguable that the Indian Christian community is already far too 'indigenous'. This is the view-point of my friend Badrinath who maintains that Indian Christianity has been totally ineffective because it has simply absorbed the general Hindu conception of religion and become another variety of this general Hindu conception of religion and become another variety of this general Indian religiosity—whereas, if it had been rightly interpreted, it would have been seen to be something radically different from any religion, namely a totally new interpretation of history. A little reflection on our Indian Christianity will show that Badrinath has powerful arguments on his side. It is obvious, for example, that the typical Indian Christian attitude to politics reveals an attitude to history which is much nearer to that of Hinduism than to that of the Bible. Witness the enormous attraction which is exerted on our community by the succession of Christian gurus who appear one after another inviting men and women to find salvation by detaching themselves from the organized Church and attaching themselves to the saviour-guru. And if one looks at the Churches of Europe and America, one would have to say that they too suffer from being far too indigenous—in the sense that they have become so much

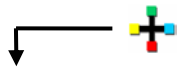


part of their culture that - apart from the protests of small groups - they do not radically challenge their culture.

IV

For these and other reasons I do not find the concept of indigenisation the best tool for tackling our problem. A term which has recently come into use is, I think, more helpful—the term 'contextualisation'. In using this term we start with the notion that every man is in a context which is not static but subject to movement. The culture which he shares is itself something changing and he has a part in directing the change. To speak of contextualisation in this connection means that each man has to seek to understand the way in which Christ is leading his own people towards the fulness of the New Man, and to try to follow and help others to follow. This means that his relation to his culture is a double one: there is both an identification and a separation. A man should love and care for his own people, his own culture, his own traditions. A man who has lost that love is less than human. But it has to be a critical and discriminating love. His participation in the New Humanity through Christ makes him aware of the fact that his own culture cannot be absolutised. It has to grow and change in the direction that the Gospel points out. Every Christian, in his relation to his own culture, must live in this tension - the tension that is always involved in true leadership, for a leader must both be one with those whom he leads and also be more and see more than they.

This approach helps us to deal with the problems raised by the pluriformity of our culture. A great city like Madras is an immensely complex organism of distinct cultures, all interacting with each other and all changing. The Christian must neither ignore these sub-cultures, nor must he absolutise them. He must seek always that style of corporate living, preaching, worshipping and acting which will enable each sub-culture to grow in the direction of a richer and fuller wholeness for the life of the City. He must be aware of the fact that a powerful culture will always seek to impose itself upon the rest and claim that in doing so it is serving the 'catholicity' of the Church. He will remember the battle which Paul fought for the distinctness and integrity



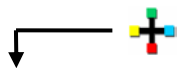
of the Gentle 'style' of Christianity against the powerful claims of the Judaisers. But he will be no less eager to remember how Paul laboured in the last years of his life to knit these two 'styles' together into a larger unity through his visits, his letters and his financial appeals. When one 'style' tries to dominate the rest in the name of catholicity, there is room for the kind of protest which is currently represented by 'Black Theology' in the U.S.A. But this can never be the normative theology. At this point I think the Bangkok Section I Report goes too far:

Proper theology includes reflection on the experience of the Christian} community in a particular place at a particular time. Thus it will necessarily be contextual theology; it will be a relevant and living theology which refuses to be easily universalised because it speaks to and out of a particular situation.

This is true, but not the whole truth. Jesus is not the name for a plastic figure which is to be constantly re-cast in my own image—although most of the popular lives of Jesus have been examples of just that. Jesus is the name of a man whose character and teaching are accessible to research. There is a core of hard historic fact—embodied in the Scriptures and the Sacraments—which remain normative and which forbid us to make the 'context' alone decisive for our thinking and teaching.

V

As I have been saying these things, I have been trying to, think of their implications for the life of the churches that I know in Madras thinking now only of those in my own diocese which I know well. There are the 'high-ups' who go to the Cathedral and the Kirk, who attend seminars at the Community Service Centre and are potential candidates for the international ecumenical circus. There are the middle class Tamil congregations who may go to the Madras Bible League, or – sometimes - to a Diocesan Laymen's Conference. And there are the real slum congregations who form their own conventicles and perhaps go to the big Pentecostal rallies. Neither of these is enough, and yet all of these different styles have to be honoured - but not absolutised. They all need to be exposed to each other and to learn from each other. And they all have to look far



beyond their own 'styles' to the purpose of God for the City as a whole, to see the call of God in all kinds of service and action, to become involved in things like city planning (The 77 Society), and community development (The New Residents Welfare Trust, etc.) and in the more militant kind of action which is called 'Community Organization. The only image which can be accepted for the Church is one which is pointing towards the renewal ,of the whole city, and the Christian has to find his identity in terms of that kind of image.

The greatest task that faces us is to help the Church to move from thinking of itself as a saved community to thinking of itself as a community which has been caught up into God's saving

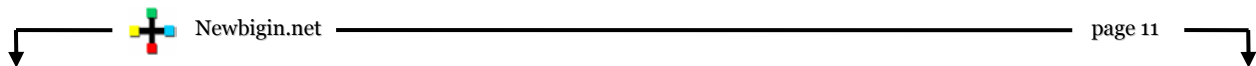
action for all men. This involves everything in our church life, -beginning with ‘our understanding of baptism and going on through worship, preaching and congregational structure. It means that the church understands itself always and only in terms of the goal to which God is leading the whole world.

But can this be the basis for a real sense of personal identity? I said at the outset that without stable personal relationships a man cannot be fully human. Can a man find full humanity in the sort of context that I have outlined?

If the Church develops in the way that I have suggested it will mean that

- there will be a vast pluriformity in the life of the Church, corresponding to the cultural pluriformity of our society;
- there will be constant tensions within each group because every culture is seen as an area of change in which the call to move forward will be resisted by the forces which seek to absolutise the existing patterns;
- these tensions will be conflicting and criss-crossing because the battles to be fought in different cultural groups will be different: what is radical in one group will be reactionary in another;
- there will be no fixed boundaries because God’s saving purpose in Jesus Christ is not limited by our membership rolls;
- there will be constant change because God does not stand still.

The question is: in such a dynamic field of changing forces, can the individual find the stable pattern of relationships without which he cannot be fully human? My answer to that question is that there is no other possibility open except that one should



grow into a deeper and more stable relationship with Jesus Christ himself through Bible, sacraments, prayer and the fellowship of others who are in Christ. The Christian can in the end only find his identity through Jesus Christ, and he grows up as a human being by learning to find his identity there.

In one of his poems written in prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks the question ‘Who am I?’ and confesses in the end that he cannot answer the question except by confessing ‘Whoever I am, thou knowest O God, I am thine’. The more ready we are to leave the securities of our small cultural solidarities and to launch out in the quest for the new humanity, the more we shall find that our human-ness depends upon our being able to confess to the one who alone is utterly faithful: I am thine.

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