



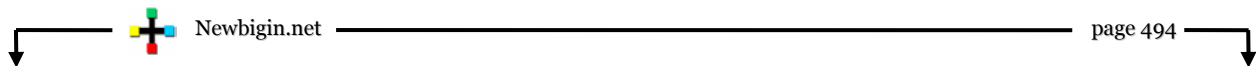
A Review of "Risking Christ for Christ's Sake," by M.M. Thomas.

1987

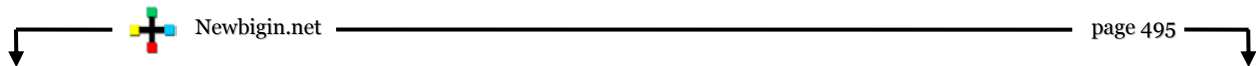
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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As its title indicates, this important book marks another stage in the author's continuing enterprise of developing a Christian



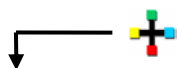
theological framework for dialogue among religions and secular ideologies. Three quarters of the work are contained in two central chapters which survey recent developments of thought on the subject in Catholic and Protestant churches and which contain sustained discussions of the work of Raymond Panikkar and Paul Devanandan. The opening chapter contains a brief survey of recent discussions of religious pluralism. The closing chapter suggests an Orthodox perspective which might transcend the Catholic-Protestant debate, and concludes with Thomas's own indications for the way forward. Both Panikkar and Devanandan, he writes, "outline the features not only of a Christ who is more than Jesus of Nazareth, but also of a people of Christ in world history which is more than the historic community of those who openly acknowledge Jesus as God and Saviour". Thomas himself goes on to affirm that we need "a redefinition of the different levels and forms of *koinonia-in-Christ* in history". He proposes three levels: (1) the eucharistic community made up of diverse peoples acknowledging the *Person* of Jesus; (2) the larger *koinonia* of dialogue among people of different faiths inwardly acknowledging the *pattern* of suffering servanthood exemplified in Jesus; (3) a still larger *koinonia* of those involved in secular struggles for a new society based on ideas *informed* by the agape of the cross.

This is a rewarding but not an easy book. Even the brilliance of Thomas's mind is not (for this reader at least) enough to penetrate the deep obscurity, not to say opacity, of some of Panikkar's writing. What is clear is that Thomas rejects the gnostic tendency to separate an "antic" Christ from Jesus of Nazareth, and that the given revelation in history is for him decisive. I believe he is right in his fundamental affirmation (if I understand rightly) that the meaning of Christ for history is better understood by looking at the centre than by trying to define the circumference. Much the greater part of the book is given to a survey of the whole debate, a

survey in which Thomas – as always – is consistently fair and generous in setting out the views of others without intruding his own. This in itself makes the book very valuable. It is only in the first and last chapters that he gives his own views with some fullness. These require and deserve the most careful pondering, for there is no one who has wrestled with these issues more profoundly than "MM". If I venture some questions, it is always with the recognition that I may not have understood.

Thomas is always concerned to relate his ultimate faith commitment to Jesus as Lord and Saviour to the penultimate commitment to find a basis for the living together of different faiths and ideologies in a working harmony which can secure the wellbeing of all people. His experience of the evils wrought by interreligious conflict in India leads him to espouse the idea of a secular society, and this naturally shapes his vision for the global human society. His concern in this book is with the relation between ultimate faith commitments which tend to separate people and "rational, moral and other common goals" (p.7) which can unite them. There can hardly be a more important issue for human wellbeing. The problem is how to relate the ultimate to the penultimate, and it is here that I do not find Thomas quite clear. In the passage from which the above phrase is taken he speaks of "rational, moral and other common goals" as being "within" the ultimate faith commitments, but in the following paragraph he speaks of them as being "alongside". Two questions arise: (1) If any commitment is ultimate, others must be subordinate – within rather than alongside. (2) It is not certain that the rational and moral goals are common, irrespective of the differing faith commitments. In the key passage which the publisher quotes on the cover of the book, Thomas speaks of the need for Christians to put their faith "alongside other faiths and alongside rationality and other human values which we share with others" (p.7). Differing faith commitments can and must be placed "alongside" one another: this is what dialogue involves. But ultimate faith commitments cannot be put "alongside" rationality. This is the heart of the problem. Reason is not independent of ultimate faith commitments; it is the way we try to order our understanding of things in the light of what we believe to be the case, and this belief is our ultimate faith commitment. You cannot put light alongside the things which light enables you to see. What appears rational within the faith commitments of Marxism may not appear rational within the faith commitment of a Christian. It is not certain that the rational, moral and social goals are common to those who have different faith commitments; some may be, but not all.

"MM" has been for nearly four decades concerned to hold up the ideal of a secular society within which his own faith commit-



ment to Jesus could live in fruitful dialogue and partnership with other faith commitments. This ideal had perhaps its most persuasive expression in Dennis Munby's book *The Idea of a Secular Society*. Re-reading this book after 25 years has brought out for me a vivid sense of the illusory character of its vision. No society exists without some shared values: if these are not determined by Christian faith they will be determined by some other. The "secular society" in Britain has become the pagan society worshipping the idols of consumerism. There is no escape from the conflict of ultimate beliefs.

What matters for the Christian is to ensure that the spiritual battle is fought only with spiritual weapons – the weapons that Jesus used, the "manifestation of the truth to every one's conscience". This means that the church betrays its Lord when it makes its own being and growth an ultimate value. God is not domesticated within ecclesiastical walls. I think that Thomas's vision of the three concentric circles is valid. And he leaves us in no doubt as to where the centre is to be found.

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