

THE INDIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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Volume One Number Two

November 1952

The Christian Hope

Jesus Christ the Crucified and the Risen Lord

The Commission appointed by the World Council of Churches to choose a theme for its next Assembly has chosen the following: 'The Christian Hope—Jesus Christ the Crucified and the Risen Lord'.

The Christian obviously lives in hope. To him life is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing. It has a present purpose and a future direction. To the Christian, history is not a mere endless repetition in cycles of the same old things. It has an inner meaning and therefore a goal. So he lives in hope, a hope that makes the present real and the future assured. But what is the nature of this hope—what is its content? Some see eschatology not only as relevant to this hope but as central to it. In this brief paper I wish to deal with this aspect of the subject, and for a fuller exposition of the subject of Christian Hope I would refer you to the revised statement on it issued by the Commission mentioned above. In our discussion we must return to this fuller exposition and also keep in view the Indian situation, for, our words of hope must be relevant to this situation.

Liberalism and Fundamentalism

The Liberal tradition in the Christian thought had rejected eschatology. The teachings of our Lord on eschatology were a subject of interest more to psycho-analysis than for serious thought. Jesus perhaps suffered from hallucinations or he accepted implicitly certain contemporary apocalyptic ideas. He was therefore either a psychopath or his humanity was only too real, therefore his divinity all the more attractive. There was also a third possibility. The Gospel writers themselves may have attributed to Jesus apocalyptic notions that were a part of certain Jewish tradition. And so, by whatsoever means, Liberalism sought to explain away those portions of the Gospels that deal with eschatology.

This Liberal tradition has influenced Christian thought on eschatology even outside the Liberal circles and many Christians today, while rejecting the Liberal tradition in general, would still agree that eschatological anticipations are extraneous to the essence of Christian teaching. This rejection of eschatological teaching by the non-Liberals is obviously due at least, in part, to the errors of Fundamentalism of a type. In their literalism, these Fundamentalists have always entertained extreme forms of apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs and have sought to determine a calendar for the return of Christ in glory to judge the quick and the dead.

One might be tempted to dismiss the renewed interest in the subject of eschatology outside the Fundamentalist groups in the Church as due to frustration and despair consequent on two world wars fought within almost one generation with devastating effects to entire humanity ; or one may ask if the atomic age is not tending to turn even intelligent Christians into literalists ? This is not true. The renewed interest is due to a new appreciation of the value, meaning and message of the Bible. This new appreciation cuts across the approaches of both the Fundamentalists and the Liberals. It does not arise in Fundamentalism because the appreciation accepts in the main the results of higher criticism. While it accepts in the main the results of higher criticism, its approach, however, is radically different from that of Liberalism. Higher criticism is essentially analytical in approach and Liberalism stops with analysis. It is unable to see any underlying unity in the Bible which higher criticism in its analysis has broken up into so many parts. The new appreciation on the contrary sees a unity in the Bible, a unity that runs right through all the books of the Bible, despite the truth of the results of higher criticism. This unity is to be found in what God has been trying to do for man. The unity of the Bible in other words is not a unity of conception. There is hardly any developing philosophy of theism in the Book. The unity is the unity of Divine action. Let us take the New Testament. The unity of the New Testament is to be found in the fact that it is centred round one event—the Incarnation, i.e., the act of God in coming into history in Jesus. But while the Incarnation is a unique event, it is not an isolated event. It is the culmination of the redemptive activity of God stretching over a long span of history, and the Old Testament is connected with the New Testament in that it reports that redemptive activity of God which in fulness of time culminated in the Incarnation. In other words, the Bible is the record and report of the revelatory acts of God. No doubt, in the actual report and record there is human error that interposes and we cannot therefore accept the literalisms of certain Fundamentalists. On the other hand, if we approach the Bible from the angle of man's vision of God, of what man has discovered of God, it falls apart into incoherent bits. It is actually reduced to a history of the religious culture of a small nation. This is the essential error into which Liberalism had fallen. In other words, its error is not in its rejection of literalism, it is not in its acceptance of the results of higher criticism, such as that the books of the Bible were often written by authors other than those whose names they bear, that the books were in some cases compilations of more than one written record, that there were historical errors in the Biblical report, etc. Its error is in its failure to see that there was a unity in the Bible despite the truth of the analysis of higher criticism—a unity centred round Divine action. And when we approach the Bible thus, it is no longer the history of a religious culture, however valuable that culture may be, but as the Germans would call it *Heilsgeschichte*, history of salvation, or history of redemption, God being the central actor in this history. Viewed thus, the Bible acquires a new meaning and authority. You cannot brush aside lightly whatever is recorded in the Bible. There is a teaching concerning eschatology in it and we have to take it seriously.

History within History

I would like us to note the following two relevant points in the Biblical teaching:—

The Idea of History within History. The Biblical record is a narrative of a history within history. There is the normal natural history of the Jewish race, comparable in many respects to the histories of other contemporary peoples. There was the continuous struggle on the part of the Jewish race to weld itself into a strong nation and into a stable political state. We find within the Jewish community parties struggling for power within the community with all the evils attendant on it. But within this general framework of history, other events occur cutting across events initiated by man's desires and ambitions, sometimes halting these events and sometimes using these events to bring forth unexpected results. The Bible attributes these other events to the intervention of God. Let us illustrate. The Jews, still a very small group, are driven into Egypt by a famine in their land. They settle down there amidst Egyptians and live among them as a distinct national and cultural minority. They soon multiply and cause a problem to the Egyptians, a problem comparable in some respects to the problem of the Negroes in the Southern States of America or Indians in South Africa. One of their men brought up in the palace is stirred to his depths by the sufferings of his people and desires to help them. In his impetuosity he commits a murder and to escape the consequences of it, he runs away from Egypt. He becomes a fugitive among a foreign people. He soon settles down to a normal life, succeeds in forgetting his crime and the sufferings of his people. One day while out tending sheep, he sees a flame in a bush but the flame does not consume the bush. He goes near it to enquire into this strange phenomenon. He hears a voice: This is holy ground—put off thy shoes. There God lays hold on Moses and orders him to go and deliver Israel from its Egyptian bondage. Eventually Israel is delivered. A history within history. So you have the same pattern right through the Old Testament narrative. There is the natural history, the sequence of events which are explainable in terms of normal historical causation. But within this process intrude events like the deliverance from Egyptian bondage, the Exile, return from the Exile, whose explanation is not from the angle of normal historical causation. They are divinely initiated events in history. There is thus a history within history in the Biblical narrative. There is the natural history of the Hebrews and there is the history of salvation. The failure to recognize this distinction has led to much confusion in Biblical studies and in the understanding of the Christian Faith. By distinguishing the history of salvation from the normal history of mankind, we do not reject the latter or deny connection between the two. *This has been obviously the mistake of some theologians. The result of recognizing this distinction is that history itself has not the seeds of redemption embedded within it.* Redemption of history is conceived not as consisting in an evolutionary growth towards an idealized form but in the redemptive intervention of God into history. This is the meaning of Incarnation too. Incarnation creates history within history. Incarnation is both an acceptance of history and rejection of it. It is an acceptance because God uses the medium of history for His self-disclosure by coming into it. It is a

rejection because the Cross, an event in the Incarnation, is the greatest condemnation of history. This rejection of history through condemnation creates a history within history. The redemption through the Cross is not thrown up by history but is a vertical descent into history, showing that the redemption of history is not an *emergent* from history. When we speak of the redemption of normal history as a vertical descent, we should not be understood to imply that God concerns Himself with history only occasionally. God's concern for human history is constant. God's Lordship of history is always a present and continuing reality. We only emphasize the fact that redemption of human history is not an *emergent* from it. This is the Biblical point of view.

Promise and Fulfilment

Secondly we come across the ideas of promise and fulfilment in the Bible. Now these two ideas are viewed normally as referring to two separate events or two separate series of events. Thus, events of the Old Testament are usually referred to as those of promise, and the Incarnation as the fulfilment of these events of promise. A careful examination will show that promise and fulfilment are not separable. There is indeed fulfilment in promise and promise in fulfilment. This is responsible for the sense of expectancy that you find in the Bible from the first page of Genesis to the last page of the Book of Revelation. This interlocking of promise and fulfilment is also responsible for that sense of tension that you always come up against in the Biblical narratives. The deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage is indeed a promise of things to come but it is also a fulfilment in relation to that particular situation. So, every act of redemption reported in the Old Testament is a promise of things to come but is also a fulfilment in relation to the particular situation in the context of which you speak of it; otherwise it would not be an act of redemption; it would be merely a *means* to redemption. Something has happened; Israel is delivered out of the Exile. That event is complete in relation to itself but there is more to follow—the suffering of Israel foreshadows the Suffering Servant and redemption through the Suffering Servant. Indeed in the New Testament this sense of fulfilment is overwhelming. God's promised Messiah has come. God's reign has begun. Nevertheless, in the very fulfilment there is a promise. The early Christians had a glimpse into what the Messianic age would be but they were realists and knew that this Messianic age and the world had nothing in common. There were foes all round, the Prince of the World was there, there were principalities and powers still to be conquered. The whole creation groaneth and travaileth even now for the manifestation of the sons of God. While the Messiah had come, they look forward to His return. While the Kingdom of God has begun, they look forward to a new Heaven, and a new Earth, to a new Jerusalem descending from heaven.

Thus in the Bible, promise and fulfilment are interlocked. There is promise but in the promised event there is fulfilment and in fulfilment there is promise and consequently the world of the Bible is a world of tension.

Lordship of Christ

With these two points in our minds we may sum up our conclusion.

We reject the position of the Biblical Literalism with regard to eschatology. It is true we cannot identify any human institution or any form of human culture with the Kingdom of God. We live in a world where only the relatively good seems possible because of the sin of man. The Kingdom of God is a constant reminder of the relative morality of men and therefore of human failure and sin. It is a judgement on man. But the Christian doctrine of creation is that God created the world with a purpose. This purpose is embodied in Jesus Christ who stands as the ἀρχή of creation, i.e., the Formal and Efficient cause of creation. As the Formal Cause something of His Form must have been imparted to creation but as the ἀρχή He is also the end of creation, the eternal archi-type. History therefore has a purpose and direction and this purpose and direction is continuously given by that other history within history—the history of redemption within the natural history of mankind. Therefore the God of Jesus cannot be thought of as having left the world to its sin, waiting for the sin to ripen for a final catastrophic intervention only. Eschatology is neither the negation nor the meaninglessness of the present but the promise of the final redemption of the present.

This final redemption of the present is not a natural growth from the present. Redemption has always been a vertical descent. This seems implied in creation. The Logos having imparted something of His own form to creation and remaining as its eternal archi-type, gave creation its grand possibility and the possibility of its conflict with God and the consequent misery and pain for man. But He who was the agent of creation, and its design, i.e., both the Efficient and Formal Cause cannot be defeated, for creation is both an expression of His grace and power. He shall triumph, even as He triumphed over the powers of evil, darkness and death in His Cross and Resurrection. So we look forward to His triumphant return with the gift of the new Age and new World. This hope of the future is also the assurance of the present.

Findings of the Conference

In our discussion of the meaning and content of the Christian Hope we must keep in view the Indian situation, so that our thinking may be existential and we may be able to speak real words of hope to our people.

Indians were filled with hope and expectancy when political independence came to them in 1947. They had hoped and, in fact, they were certain that with political independence gained, it was only a matter of time before the age-long misery of poverty, disease and hunger of India's millions would be removed. They confidently looked forward to a new era of peace, contentment and prosperity. But within a short space of three or four years these hopes had completely vanished and had given place to despair, gloom and even to a near conviction that the country had no future.

The Contemporary Situation

Perhaps the reasons for this changed attitude are the following:—

1. The people expected that with their own leaders at the helm of affairs, *quick* changes for the better would occur in the economic and social spheres. Grinding poverty was the lot of millions. The educated middle class were under a perpetual fear because of economic insecurity. Communalism and casteism kept the nation divided. It was believed that the country had the resources, and the leaders the wisdom to remove these evils *quickly*. The leaders themselves because of their idealism and their inexperience in administration promised too much. But alas, after three, four and five years, few *striking* changes have taken place. The result is frustration of hopes.

2. The people had fully believed that they and the leaders of the country had in them the character necessary for shouldering responsibility and for responsible behaviour in society. Had not the leaders and many common men made great sacrifices for the cause of India's independence? Was not the history of the Independence Movement full of instances of self-giving and sacrificial service? They were indeed a unique people who had won their independence not by the use of the sword but by the strength of their character. Nevertheless, they soon discovered that many of the leaders were gods with only clay feet. The character of the people in which they took so much pride was not really there. Corruption in public life, to which they had previously turned a blind eye, had now become obvious. It had assumed unprecedented proportions. Their belief in themselves and in their leaders had crashed. They began to repeat the slogan, 'India will go the way of China'.

3. Hinduism has its own philosophy of history according to which history had only a pragmatic reality. Reality in itself to the *Advaitin*, at least, is impersonal with no conscious activity of its own; it is changeless and immutable. History on the other hand is a scene of activity; it is the realm of change. As an order representing activity and change it is antithetical to Reality. Therefore, at the highest, history has only a pragmatic reality. There are systems of Hindu thought which repudiate the *Advaita* interpretation of history but even they find it difficult to treat history seriously. Creation is due to the *Lila* of God, a sportive impulse in Him. 'While *Lila* does not imply meaningless playfulness, it expresses the Hindu shyness in ascribing to God purposiveness in creation. Purposiveness implies a working toward ends, and working toward ends implies that there is something that is yet unrealized—something that is in the end only. But to God and in God there is nothing that is unrealized. There is no lack in Him and so it is contended that we cannot ascribe purposes to God. Accordingly there is nothing even in the theistic Hinduism comparable to the Christian conception of the Church, or the Kingdom of God, both of these taken to represent the Christian belief in the partially realized will of God in the temporal order, though both having a futuristic and eschatological reference. Furthermore, the law of moral economy in the world is the Law of *Karma*. No doubt the Law of *Karma* in a sense expresses divine purpose, but once having been ordained by God for man's good, it operates with as absolute an autonomy as the causal law in the

techniques based on the ownership of wealth by the community. It is utopian in outlook and therefore completely optimistic. Its utopianism demands no faith in things unseen but in its own interpretation of history and in a temporary struggle—even though it be bitter—to wrest power from the few vested interests so that eventually it will be vested in a free and stateless society. It is a gospel of hope for the dispossessed who form the majority of the people.

(b) *Technology*.—Some people attribute the ills of India not necessarily to mal-distribution of wealth but to the absence of technological means to develop the enormous resources of the country. In the creation of industries, in the application of scientific methods to agriculture, and of technology generally, to the production of more wealth, lies India's hope of salvation. So we have the slogan 'produce more wealth' and our universities are becoming over-crowded with young hopefuls studying the sciences.

(c) *Religious and Cultural Revival*.—A few are trying to instill hope by an appeal for religious and cultural revival. It is contended that the necessary ideology for reconstructing society on a just basis is available within Hinduism and that the hope of the nation lies in return to its ancient faith. Furthermore, it is frankly recognized that Hinduism is eclectic, or more accurately, that it is tolerant enough to receive new light, though always insisting on the primacy of spiritual values. There is a sincere attempt to conceive an ideal form of society on the basis of ancient teachings and on certain supposedly historical truths. Thus you have the concept of *Rama Rajya*, a version of the Kingdom of God. This appeal to religious revival, however, does not seem to make headway.

The Christian Hope

In the light of all that is stated above what is the Christian message of Hope ?

In the first place our message must be addressed to the Church.

All that we can say concerning the Christian Hope is relevant to the Church. It must first understand what the Christian hope is, accept it and so order its life in the contemporary situation that it will witness to that hope effectively and concretely. It must be alive to its vocation. If the Church is considered to be the extension of the Incarnation and the Incarnation had a reality in history and a rôle to play in history, the Church must show similar signs in its life. It must take its responsible part in history, though its destinies are bound up with that which is beyond history.

The Christian Hope is rooted in the *Lordship of Christ*. We believe that the Lordship of Christ covers not only the entire range of time, i.e., past, present and future, but that it shall be manifested fully in the new Age that is beyond the range of all temporal reckoning. Perhaps this meaning of the Lordship of Christ can be seen best in the light of the doctrine of creation and redemption, as contained in the teaching of St. John's Gospel concerning the Logos.

In the first place the Lordship of Christ means that He is the Lord of history. History had its beginning in Him and in His activity as the eternal Logos. 'All things were made by Him ; and without Him was not anything made that hath been made.' Thus Christ, the Logos, was

the agent of creation, its efficient cause. But the Logos was also in the beginning and thus was the ἀρχή of things, i.e., the embodiment of the ends, the design and purpose of creation. The Logos or the Christ is what the Greeks would have called the 'Formal Cause' of creation or what the Indians call the *Nimitta Karana* of creation. Surely St. Paul also has something of this thought in his mind when in his letter to the Colossians he presents Christ as the eternal Archi-type towards which the whole created order is moving. The Christian doctrine of creation is that at the centre of creation stands the Logos, the Christ, as its meaning, purpose and end. And the Logos is not merely a conception, for, Christ was made flesh, and tabernacled among men being manifest before them in concrete form. Our understanding of the world, of life and of history is derived from what we see in Jesus Christ. Our message of hope to the world in the first place is that the world has a purpose and that in Christ we see this purpose.

In the second place the Lordship of Christ means that Christ is the Lord *in* History. As the eternal Logos, He is the Word of God that proceeds forth from God, speaking to chosen leaders and prophets, commanding nations, pronouncing judgement on them and offering pardon to them. The same Logos who spoke to chosen leaders, prophets, who commanded nations, pronouncing judgement and pardon, who was made flesh and dwelt among men, lives today as the risen Lord within the Church, nay even outside it, the immanent Lord setting His Church in which He dwells as a sign and seal of His design for a new creation, judging and chastising the Church when it proves disloyal to its vocation, and even using forces outside the Church, because of its recurring apostasy.

Thus to the Christian the Lordship of Christ is a present reality and his hope is rooted in that fact. The Incarnate Logos is the proof for the Christian, of God's perpetual concern for man and the assurance of the working of the Spirit of God in history, striving with the rebellious spirit of man to bring him back to his Father's home. Negatively speaking, therefore, the Christian cannot commit himself to any view that would imply the meaninglessness of the present. He cannot subscribe to these apocalyptic and millenarian beliefs which seem to imply that having condemned and judged the world for its sin, God has withdrawn from it waiting only for sin to ripen for a final catastrophic intervention. Because of the Incarnation which signifies perpetual concern of God for man, and because of the Resurrection which signifies God's power to conquer evil, and because both together imply His immanent presence in His creation, the Christian cannot turn his gaze away from the present to look exclusively to the future. While not minimizing the fact that the world is truly under God's judgement, the Christian affirms that even the fruits of the wrath of man might at the present be singing, if only in a minor key, the very praises of God. The hope of the Christian therefore based on the present reality of the Lordship of Christ challenges him and the Church to exercise the prophetic function, interpreting the Will of God, working for such changes in the society as may appear to be in accord with that Will, in the belief that God in His wisdom will transform all present acts of obedience to His glory in the End.

There is therefore a challenge to the Church in India today. In the face of widespread misery from hunger and nakedness, suffering and

disease, brought about by man's sin of disobedience, the Church cannot keep silent or be indifferent. It is called upon to perform its prophetic function and to assist in such action as may be necessary to bring about a social order reflecting the purposes of God as are revealed and embodied in Christ. It is urgent that the Church in India should know what responsible society in accordance with the purposes of God in Christ means. If it remains indifferent to the need of creating such a society in India, secular and false philosophies as those of Communism and redemption through technology will triumph over it and God's judgement on it will be the emergence of a godless society which will seek to subordinate it to its godless purposes, as has happened in other countries.

In the third place the Lordship of Christ means that Christ is the Lord *over* history. There is no place for historical pessimism in the Christian faith. If the Christian doctrines of creation and redemption are right, the Christian places value on the historical order. On the other hand the doctrine of redemption points to the fact of human sin. He who does not take account of the fact of sin builds his hope on utopian ideals. Some believe that human nature is essentially good and that with proper planning for education, health and welfare, it can be perfected. But the prophets of secular humanism lived to see their hopes belied. With H. G. Wells' 'Mind at the end of its tether' we may say an era had come to an end. The seriousness of the collapse of human hopes is in proportion to the strength of man's faith in the perfectibility of his nature. The collapse of the hopeful attitude of the vast majority of Indians after independence is due, as we have noticed earlier, to their implicit faith in the goodness of themselves and of their leaders. While indeed the spirit of God is working in history, man individually and corporately is continuously at war with the workings of that Spirit. Because of human sin, the noblest of our moralities is only relative. In a sinful society it is an unwarranted pretension to think that absolutes of morality are realizable, though they should always remain our goals. No human institution, and no form of human culture can ever be identified with the Kingdom of God. The noblest of man's achievements are at best only sub-Christian! The Christian does not believe, therefore, that the ends of history can be realized within history; and yet he does not and cannot doubt these ends for a moment.

When, therefore, we speak of the Lordship of Christ *over* history, what we mean is that despite all human failure Christ will still triumph. The eternal Logos, the Efficient and Formal Cause of creation cannot be defeated, for creation is an expression both of His grace and power. Therefore Christ will be victorious over the powers of evil, darkness and death as in His Cross and Resurrection. So we look forward to the return of Christ in glory with the gift of a New Age and New World. *This certainty of the future is also our charter for the present.*

The Christian Hope is thus rooted in the Christian Faith that Christ is the Lord of History, Lord *in* History and Lord *over* History.