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Reflections on Evanston

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In recent ecumenical conversations the expression, 'Pilgrim People of God', has been used of the Church and it might rightly be said that Evanston marked an important stage in the Pilgrimage. In India, pilgrims go from place to place seeking darshan (vision). The ecumenical pilgrims too at Evanston received a new vision of God's purpose for His people. Though in one sense it might be called a mountain top experience for the Church, it was not the experience of a people escaping from the problems of the world, but of a people sent out into the world to face its problems and tensions. The two words round which the Evanston vision of the People of God might be summed up are 'Hope' and 'Unity'.

The choice of Hope as the theme for the second Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Evanston, had created wide interest in the study of eschatology. The third report of the Advisory Commission was not simply the result of the pooling of the thinking of a few expert theologians. Comments and criticisms made on the previous reports by individuals and groups all over the world had been considered in the preparation of the third report. A report which had been prepared with the help of the intensive study of theologians and Biblical scholars and after wide discussion in the Church could not easily be improved by a general assembly of the World Council. The Assembly could only commend the third report for the careful study of the churches, with certain comments. No advance was made at Evanston in the understanding of the Christian doctrine of eschatology. Very little criticism was directed against the substance of the third report. The discussions at the Assembly, however, helped to show certain important omissions, such as, the present work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the world. Dissatisfaction was also expressed about the treatment in the report of non-Christian religions and rival hopes. The total reaction of the Assembly to the report may be summed up in the words of the Assembly statement itself: 'It moved us not only to agreement and disagreement, but to testimony.'

Hope

The opening addresses on Hope by Professor Schlink of Heidelberg and Professor Calhoun of Yale seemed to justify the fears of some that there was going to be a clash between the 'American' and the 'European' attitudes to eschatology. But the process of discovering one another revealed that regional or geographic labels were inadequate for describing the deep theological differences and that underneath much of the verbal differences of expression were common fundamental convictions. The pageant on the Christian Hope enacted at the Festival of Faith in Soldier

Field, even though produced by Americans, could be appreciated by all as expressing the central stream of the Biblical drama of redemption. There was certainly difficulty at the Assembly in accepting any particular doctrinal statement about hope. But there was not the least doubt that Christ is the ground of our hope and that it is for His coming in glory that we all wait with eager hope, 'knowing that God is faithful and that even now He holds all things in His hand.'

Unity

Speaking of Unity, it cannot be forgotten that it is the realization of our fundamental unity in Christ which has led us to the modern ecumenical movement. At Amsterdam the churches declared that they 'intend to stay together'. But this declaration could not end the problem of disunity in the Church. The Evanston Assembly was an Assembly of the Council of *Churches* remaining in separation. In some ways the last six years of the existence of the World Council had brought the churches into closer knowledge of one another and the delegates at Evanston felt free to criticize one another frankly. But it cannot yet be said that the World Council has cleared any of the real obstacles to unity. The Eastern Orthodox churches found it difficult at Evanston to accept a common statement on the Faith and Order theme, namely, *Our Oneness in Christ and our Disunity as Churches*. The report adopted by the Assembly, however, made a statement bolder than any previous ecumenical document. It said, 'when churches, in their actual historical situations, reach a point of readiness and a time of decision, then their witnessing may require obedience unto death. They may then have to be prepared to offer up some of their accustomed, inherited forms of life in uniting with other churches without complete certainty as to all that will emerge from the step of faith.' The World Council of Churches does not exist as an end in itself. It exists, on the contrary, constantly to remind the churches of the Lord's intention for the Church's unity and to encourage the churches to move forward in obedience to the Lord in adventures of visible unity. The celebration of the Liturgy of the Church of South India was a reminder to many at the Assembly of Christ's call to the churches to witness to Him through visible unity. Many openly said that the C.S.I. Liturgy was the highest point of their Evanston experience. Evanston was not satisfied with the Amsterdam declaration, 'We intend to *stay* together,' but went on to say, 'we dedicate ourselves to God anew that He may enable us to grow together.'

The Challenge of Hope in the World

The notes of 'hope' and 'unity' in Christ heard at Evanston were not the notes of abstract theology. They were the affirmations in faith of a people living in many different concrete situations on earth. Though a little overweighted with the clergy, the Assembly was composed of representatives of many different occupations. There were college professors, labour leaders, trade unionists, doctors, bankers, farmers, statesmen, lawyers and people of many other professions. One was also repeatedly made aware that even the People of God were living in the world sharing the limitations of the social and cultural environments.

The Evanston Assembly could not altogether stand detached from the influences of ideological or cultural backgrounds and political situations. For some delegates communism represented the greatest threat to democracy and free enterprise was the best expression of democracy. Charles Taft, for example, tried to defend the American culture, saying, 'This culture at its best is really a product of Christian principles.' Others, particularly those from Asian and African countries, were concerned not so much with liberal democracy as with the economic justice which is a prerequisite for democracy. Many statements and incidents reminded us of the concrete and ugly problems of this world. The denial of the freedom of movement in America to Bishop Peter of Hungary, and the open letter to Dr. J. H. Hromadka from the Czechoslovakian refugees in Chicago, calling him a traitor, reflected some of the international tensions. The dramatic presentation by Dr. M. Kozaki of Japan of a petition signed by thousands of Japanese asking for the banning of all nuclear weapons showed another aspect of the world situation. The speeches made by the Rev. P. K. Dagadu of Africa and Dr. Charles Malik of Lebanon on 'Asia and Africa ask Searching Questions' were marked by the new spirit of the Asian and African peoples claiming equal partnership with Western powers. Behind the insistence by many of the European delegates on the importance of the salvation of the Jews for Christian eschatology and the rejection of their proposal by most of the non-Europeans there was perhaps an example of the influence of social, cultural and other environmental factors on theological convictions. The discussion over the substitution of 'equality' by the rather insipid word 'equity' as a goal of social and economic justice was further evidence of the division in the Church caused by the problems of the world. But, in spite of the many differences of national, cultural, ideological and social backgrounds, Evanston was a demonstration of the power of Christ to overcome these differences. The differences were never great enough to break the fellowship with one another in Christ. One of the most memorable statements made at Evanston was that made by Bishop Peter, who said, 'We came from the other side of the world, but not from another side of the Church. At home and here too, we proclaim against all divisions and tensions the unbreakable oneness of the Church.' One cannot say that Evanston said anything radically new on our hope in Christ or the unity of the Church. But there is no doubt that the challenge of these themes for the Church's task today was expressed much more forcibly than at previous ecumenical gatherings. The Church's hope is hope in Christ. The rather abstract expression 'Christian hope' was abandoned in favour of 'hope in Christ'. The Church's hope is not the perfection of this world within history but the consummation of God's Kingdom and appearance of Christ in glory. At the same time the Church's hope affirmed at Evanston is not merely the hope in a hereafter. It is a hope which is challengingly relevant for the concrete situations in this world. More time was spent at Evanston in grappling with the tangled social, economic and political problems of this world than with the understanding of the doctrine of hope. Even though it was not easy for theologians to agree about the nature of the relation between our ultimate hope in Christ and our provisional hopes in the social and political spheres, the Evanston deliberations were marked by the common conviction that the Church's

hope in Christ gives her a mission to fulfil in this world. The Church's mission is not a fresh discovery of the second Assembly of the World Council. The mission is the proclaiming of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to His power in every sphere of life in the world. The contribution of Evanston is in stating the nature of the mission in concrete terms, in terms challenging individual believers as well as churches to a fresh obedience of the Lord.

The Mission to Unity in the World

It is true that no progress was made at Evanston in the movement towards the visible unity of the Church. It may even be said that the strengthening of confessional loyalties and particularly the attitude taken by the Orthodox churches gave the impression of a retrograde movement from the point of view of Church unity. But no previous ecumenical gathering so forcibly impressed upon the participants the intimate relation between the Church's mission and unity, and therefore the urgency and the dynamic character of Unity. Underlying the discussions on Responsible Society, Racial Tensions, International Relations, the Laity and other practical problems, was the conviction that in every area of human relations the Church's mission is a ministry of reconciliation. It is a mission to unity in Christ where sin in various forms had created disharmony and disunity.

The mission to unity or the ministry of reconciliation may be regarded as the key to the understanding of the sectional reports. The report on Responsible Society says, 'It will be the task of the churches to point to the dangers inherent in the present situation: on the one hand the temptation to succumb to anti-communist hysteria and the danger of a self-righteous assurance concerning the political and social systems of the West; on the other hand the temptation to accept the false promises of communism and to overlook its threat to any responsible society. Christians in communist and non-communist countries are called to hold each other in special brotherly concern and prayer across all barriers. Those of us in non-communist lands affirm our unity with these churches in the ecumenical fellowship and the bond of the Spirit, and our confidence in their loyalty to Christ.' In the sphere of international affairs also the Church's rôle is to help the nations 'to live together in a divided world.' The report says, 'Above all, Christians must witness to a dynamic hope in God, in whose hands lie the destinies of the nations, and in this confidence be untiring in their efforts to create and maintain an international climate favourable for reconciliation and goodwill.' After speaking of certain minimum conditions to be met by both sides of the divided world the report goes on to speak of the necessity of moving beyond the minimum requirements into an order of genuine co-operation. 'This order will be facilitated and reinforced through the free exchange of persons, culture, information and goods; through common undertakings for relief and human welfare.' 'Christians must go still further. They must promote the reconciliation of the nations; they must work for the establishment of justice based on a rule of law, so that a responsible society, grounded in truth, may be possible.' In the report on International Relations we read, 'Racial and ethnic fears, hates and prejudices are more than social problems with whose existence we must reckon;

they are sins against God and His commandments that the Gospel alone can cure. To the Church has been committed the preaching of the Gospel; to proclaim the healing of the nations through Christ is verily her task... It is however only when the churches come to Christ in penitence and obedience, and receive from Him His cleansing, that they receive from Him authority to proclaim His will with the voice of prophecy... The Church has a duty to create and to keep open every possible line of communication between people, between political opponents, between people of differing views, cultures, races, languages, between the conservative and the venturesome.'

The Mission to Unity through Church Union

This mission to unity cannot be fulfilled by a divided Church. The report on the Faith and Order theme says that the divided state of the Church is sinful because 'it obscures from men the sufficiency of Christ's atonement, inasmuch as the Gospel of reconciliation is denied in the very lives of those who proclaim it.' The urgency of manifesting to the world the power of Christ to break down the walls of partition is very forcibly expressed. It is, at the same time, recognized that the churches will realize their unity only as they together seek to fulfil their mission in the world. 'Whenever we are prepared to undertake together the study of the Word of God and are resolved to be obedient to what we are told, we are on the way toward realizing the oneness of the Church in Christ in the actual state of our dividedness on earth.'

Thus as Professor W. Freytag has said, 'looking back on Evanston, there is much cause for reflection, for prayer, and for action.' We may say that in India we are in some ways ahead of the ecumenical movement in that we have achieved Church union, though only in a small measure. But in the light of our hope in Christ, the mission to unity committed to the Church is more dynamic than mere ecclesiastical unity. There are wide gulfs separating economic and social classes, caste groups and many kinds of group tensions affecting the harmony of human relations in this country. The ministry of reconciliation in this context is not easy. It will certainly imply pioneering in the sphere of social and economic justice as well as in the sphere of personal reconciliation. Within the Church too Church union will not solve all problems. There are areas in the life of the Church where the world seems to have conquered the Church. The Church too is guilty of caste and class distinctions. The Evanston reports do have a challenging message for the churches in India.

In international affairs today India is playing a very constructive rôle, acting as an instrument of reconciliation or mediation. The Church in India also may be an effective instrument at this time if, following the decision of Evanston regarding the establishment of contact with churches in 'iron curtain countries', she sought to establish close relationships with the Church in China and Russia. One way of achieving this may be by organizing a friendship mission consisting of Indian Christians to visit the churches in China and Russia and other 'Eastern' countries. Christ has promised that the gates of Hades cannot prevail against the Church. In obedience to our Lord we have to receive strength from Him to manifest the unity of the Church which cannot be broken by the sinful divisions of the world.

one true Brahma is therefore not a construction or projection of human reasoning; the point in question is rather a certainty, arising from a 'revelation': what is not available to reason and what in general is not perceptible is simply taken absolutely for granted. One could even go further and say: the consistent monism of the Vedanta is nothing but the all-embracing philosophic and theological evaluation of the religious fundamental phenomenon: of the experience of the 'quite different one', i.e. the experience of God. This experience of the perpetual, of the unchangeable, of the eternal origin of all things, the 'wholly other substance', is recognized as the only truth and—contrary to all appearances—made the source of all explanation of life and cosmos. And it is precisely as an interpretation of that experience of the 'wholly other' substance that the Vedanta should be utilized for theological research.

It is at this point useful to pause and glance at the development of Christian theology in India up to this time. What discussion have the Mission and the Church so far had with the Vedanta? The answer is indisputable—and disheartening.

The chorus of opinions on this question resounds pure, clear and overwhelming: this philosophy must be rejected without compromise because of its blending of God and man, its unjustifiable depreciation of creation, its ethical indifference.

In three ways Christian theology has confronted Hinduism:

1. The traditional criticism of Indian religion and philosophy is the purely negative one of aggression, contrasting the two religions. In the nineteenth century this was done simply by opposing the Christian system of thinking as the final revelation of the living God, sometimes in very bellicose fashion, to an insufficiently understood Hinduism, which was presented as a lie and a delusion of Satan, in the (of course unfulfilled) hope that the poor, erring Hindus would become aware of the imprisoning character of their thinking and would unreservedly accept the revealed system of truth.

A closer study of the Indian original writings has enabled us to see that this is not so easily done; and, since the First World War, we began to postulate the peculiarity of the Christian revelation in contrast to Hinduism, which seems, in the Christian view, to be closely self-contained. For Hinduism had noticed very quickly that in its philosophic-religious structure there was ample room for Christ, and so it had begun to assimilate Christianity.

The theological sterility of this contrasting method is obvious. Theological research consists in constantly renewed endeavour to grasp the facts about Christ to an ever deeper extent. It is a constant circling round Christ which is never completed, whereby new approaches, new points of view, new discoveries—and new experiences—throw an ever new light upon the one subject—Christ. Yet the negative-aggressive attitude to foreign religions loses sight of the purpose of genuine theological research. It even turns its back on the Centre of this work and, swinging sharply round, sees itself confronted by a fictitious attack. And that means that we are no longer circling round Christ: to meet that fictitious front, we have ourselves to form a battle line, to rely upon a system of perceptions as complete and unchangeable as possible, in order to hold our ground.