

Mission in The Indian Cultural Context : The Significance of Paul David Devanandan

*SIGA ARLES **

At the closure of Western colonialism and the birth of independence, there was a widespread drawing of distinctions between Western and indigenous Indian thought. It was seen both in the wider socio-political and the ecclesiastical realms. Devanandan lived through the period which prepared itself and then went through the change both national and ecclesiastical. He was secretary to KT Paul and accompanied him to the United States where his seven year education between 1925-32 influenced him with liberal Protestant ideas and pragmatic outlook on life. "Very much a product of the young American society", he started as a teacher at UTC, Bangalore in 1932. He emphasised the "ideals of Jesus" as belonging to the core of Christianity and stressed Christian faith in terms of moral and philosophical values¹. Soon the theologically and politically outspoken Devanandan went through change² in his thinking, growing more and more dissatisfied with theological liberalism which was then in vogue.

As a student of theological liberalism which reduced his Christianity to a kind of religious philosophy, he revolted against it and found in Kraemer a basis for the renewal of his theology.³

Devanandan felt drawn to Kraemer who represented the cutting edge between what was developing as the distinction between Western and Indigenous Christian thought. The neo-orthodoxy of Barth, Kraemer and Brunner influenced Devanandan. Yet he noted that "Barth and Kraemer... stressed the fact that revelation is from God at the expense of the fact that it is to and for the world of men"⁴. Barth denied the possibility of natural theology and Kraemer denied revelation in other religions. Devanandan criticised these views and disagreed with Kraemer's negative approach to the non-Christian world and his conclusion that non-Christian religions were basically human enterprises devoid

* Dr. Siga Arles teaches Mission at Serampore College.

of God's revelation. When Kraemerian influence was at its peak at the Tambaram IMC Conference of 1938, men like AG Hogg disagreed and questioned such views. The Rethinking Group in Madras had already expressed its views on Kraemer's book *The Christian Message in a non-Christian World* in "A review of Dr. Kraemer's book" appended to their collection of essays: *Rethinking Christianity in India*⁵. Devanandan aligned himself with the views of AG Hogg.

By way of rejection Devanandan went into a post-Kraemerian theology. Whereas the neo-orthodox impulse rejected "culture religion" and "any programme of merely earthly betterment" insisting on the "radical otherness of the Gospel", Devanandan argued for a Christian concern in society and desired the creation of a theology which regards a positive approach to other religions and cultural contexts. He called upon his fellow Indian Christians, saying:

We as Christians ought to act as pioneers in radically removing the more important social evils in India by personal example.⁶ One of the primary tasks of Christian evangelism in India as elsewhere in our modern world is to make clear to the mind of thinking people that religion is relevant to life; that Christianity concerns this life as much as the life everlasting; that ours is a revolutionary faith which asks to realise here on earth abiding standards of righteousness and justice because these are the very nature of the Church.⁷

Devanandan believed that Christian concern in society was not merely political or economic but primarily theological, rooted in and governed by the insight that "our faith stands for the redemption of the whole man" here and now.⁸

In this theological concern for the present and the problems of the present, Devanandan's views were shaped by the influence of E. Stanley Jones. In the thirties, "Church" became the object of almost every significant sentence on mission and talk about "Church unity" for the sake of mission grew dominant. Debate arose on the question whether the Church or the Kingdom of God should be the starting point of missionary concern. Stanley Jones held that the Kingdom of God is the motive and starting point⁹, disapproving of the prominence given to the Church with the fear that it created a pseudoabsolute type similar to fascism and communism. To Jones Church was not the only locus of God's activity; and the Kingdom was universal in extent. Jones implied an inclusive view of the Kingdom; a

comprehensive, all inclusive conception which will gather up the total meaning of life into one living whole and give meaning

and validity to the whole.¹⁰

Such universalism presented a smooth, rounded doctrine of God's kingship over the world. Jones called the Church for involvement in a social mission, based on the view that already the secular preoccupation with social justice is evidence of the kingdom of God here and now. Devanandan, and later MM Thomas took this social mission seriously to develop the idea of the Church's mission as social action for justice.

The Indian Theological Conference of 1942 at Poona¹¹ also had an impact on Devanandan's thinking. There he was "freed" to seek evidence of God's revelation in Hinduism ignoring confessional boundaries. Distinction was made at the Poona conference between the ultimate and the penultimate, dogma and doctrine, the central core and the relative expression of the Gospel. Hogg's criticism of Kraemer led to this differentiation of dogma and doctrine. This, in the opinion of Marcus Ward, set Indian Christian Theology free to look at Hinduism not as a totally alien, indivisible system but as a source of knowledge open to Indian Christians. Devanandan took lead with this new found freedom, going beyond Western understandings. D.A. Thangasamy indicates that the visit of Emil Brunner was 'catalytic in Chenchiah's own view for the birth of Indian theology'.¹² We note Indian thinkers found inspiration, input and information from 'catalytic' Western Christian theologians and philosophers, but were not settling to either imitate or parrot them. To further those influences, to adapt them to the Hindu Indian environment was the attempt of Indian Christian theologians. They were ready to disagree with Western theologies at places where their own environment i.e., cultural context informed them otherwise. This tendency was already expressed in the thirties by the lay Christian theological thinkers of the Rethinking Group :

The Church in India was bent on escaping from the leading-strings of the Christian missionary agencies in theological matters... the time when Western Christians could dictate to India the terms on which the encounter of the faiths was to be understood is now past and gone... "We accept nothing as obligatory save Christ..."¹³

Devanandan was to lay a new foundation for Indian Christian Theology particularly for inter-religious understanding and dialogue very much influenced by Poona conference. He on the one hand accepted the Kraemerian antidote to liberalism in theocentricity, but on the other he interpreted this theocentricity as God's sovereignty over the world ; that God is Lord of all and that this demands the task of making the Gospel relevant to all.

His all embracing concept of God included a theological interpretation of the social order, a world-oriented interpretation of God and God's mission.

Devanandan observes from the history of the Church and her mission in India :

For some time past, we have considered our evangelistic task in terms of confronting other non-Christian religious systems with the counter claims of Christianity as another system of religion. We have been preaching a way of life, a system of thought, instead of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which still is : God's reign is already here.¹⁴

God's reign here and now was to mean that the Christian lived and shared 'community' with his neighbour ; and since Hindus were considerably the majority, Devanandan took it seriously upon him to interpret Christian mission from a Hindu cultural context.

Devanandan's emphasis on social action and dialogue are strategic sectors of the mission of the Church in India. A major contribution of Devanandan to Indian Christian Theology is to interpret mission as *lokasamgraha*. The Sanskrit term *lokasamgraha* occurs twice in the Bhagavad Gita and means "the maintenance of the world", "to maintain the world order", "the holding together" by wise person or saint in the liturgical or sacred action, "*dharmā*", "caste duty", "keeping of people to their duties", "the order of the word" and the idea of the "welfare of the world".¹⁵ It is the goal of *niṣkāma karma* or disinterested action as a religious person involves in "service of God and the welfare of the world". This world oriented emphasis of Devanandan was also due to the influence of neo-Hinduism upon his thinking. Of special significance were the influences of Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo. Radhakrishnan opined that *lokasamgraha* or working for the welfare of others demands a change in the whole pattern of life, wherein one is continuously active. He wrote :

Lokasangraha stands for the unity of the world, the interrelatedness of society. If the world is not to sink into a condition of physical misery and moral degradation, if the common life is to be decent and dignified, religious ethics must control social action. The aim of religion is to spiritualise society and establish brotherhood on earth. We must be inspired by the hope of embodying ideals in earthly institutions.¹⁶

Aurobindo Ghose understood human person through his/her relations with his/her environment and through world harmony. Devanandan linked up with this trend in neo-Hinduism. Since

secularization brought on a dissolution of traditional Indian society, there developed a contextual concern in post-independence India for finding “new foundations for her political and social structures” and “an adequate social philosophy”¹⁷. This search was a common search of all Indians and Devanandan opined that Christian participation in this search should be the way forward for relevant Christian mission in India. Such participation in a common concern sets prerequisites. On a theoretical level it demands a concern for the individual and a dynamic understanding of history - a new anthropology and a historical consciousness; and on the practical level an active inter-religious interaction (dialogue) and cooperation in social action¹⁸. Devanandan began to study the implications of these prerequisites, as his written works reveal. Whereas he concentrated on the content of inter-religious interaction, his associate and successor MM Thomas took up the implications of Christian co-operation for social action. Thus together they spearheaded the development of an ecumenical theology of mission in India, centred around CISRS group of thinkers and influencing the Church in India through the National Council and Serampore structures.

To Devanandan mission as *lokasamgraha* meant the producing of a community of ‘man with man’ And ‘men with God’, ‘a triangular community’, the ‘true community’ “in which alone a person finds himself as a person among persons in relation to *the person*”¹⁹. His theocentric perspective accommodated all religions as within the common search for community around one God, while yet he retained his Christian claim to uniqueness of Christ as the person who alone mattered. He spoke of “God’s redemptive activity outside the Church” with a theocentricity transcending confessionalism. He wrote :

It may not be fair to say that God in His graciousness will not reward the faith of the non-Christian seeker...

Yet as a Christian apologist he goes on :

We press forward with the mission of testimony which has been delivered to us declaring to the end of time that there is no other name given under heaven by which men shall be saved except the name Jesus Christ.²⁰

He interpreted the Christian task as “to bring these men of faith to confront the living Christ” affecting “a face to face meeting of the credal claims of Christ in the Gospel”²¹. Devanandan envisaged three different stages in the ‘apologetic’ task of the Christian in dialogue. First, a detailed study of the different varieties of modern Hinduism; second, a clarification of

terminology; and third, the daring task of evolving an Indian theological expression of the Christian faith²². In *Preparation for Dialogue* his view is expressed:

Effective communication of the Gospel to the non-Christian men of faith depends on the effective use made of the religious vocabulary with which he is familiar, and of the cultural pattern of life in which he finds self-expression and community being.²³

On the one hand, along with Hogg, Devanandan wished to discover a "seeking and finding" of God in other religions; and on the other he was concerned to assert the uniqueness of the Christian faith²⁴. Richard Keithahn remarked hence, that though an original thinker, Devanandan was "not wholly free of a certain missionary conservatism in his approach to Hinduism²⁵. One could see, as Morton does, that "Devanandan's theology of religions was not a systematic treatment of the extra-ecclesiastical presence of the new creation" and that he "did not develop his theological basis for it to any great extent". Perhaps he would have done so, if he lived longer.

Devanandan's emphasis on *lokasamagraha* as God's purpose directed towards both the Church and the world is also not fully developed. "The relation between the Church, as bearer of divine mission (*koinonia-lokasamagraha*), and the world, as the sphere of God's activity, still remains a question unsatisfactorily answered... His theological attention moved away from the world as he concentrated on the Church unlike Stanley Jones, giving it a special status. Such attachment of special status raises a wall of division between the Church and the world. Yet his biblical basis drawn from II Corinthians 5:17-19 prescribed a "ministry of reconciliation", involving the Church as new creation into the world - the creation awaiting to be renewed. The concern of God's mission lies with the world being recreated. The focus of God's action is on the world's renewal²⁶.

In the 'triangular true community' the question naturally faced is that of ecclesiastical boundaries. EJ Sharpe finds in Devanandan a rather liberal attitude akin to an "anonymous Christianity point of view"²⁷. But Devanandan tried "to be very cautious not to go too far with his extra-ecclesiastical speculations"²⁸. His willingness to see the movement of the Holy Spirit in other religions was "strongly qualified by a far more developed Church-centredness which views it an important part of mission to draw people into the Church... affirming the continued relevance of baptism"²⁹. Devanandan interpreted 'conversion' as the sign of God's new creation, the true origin of community"

and saw it functioning as a two way process, “extension of God’s activity on two fronts, ... inward into the Church and outward into the world”³⁰. Whereas the inward journey of non-Christian Indians into the Church was the preoccupation of conservative and evangelical missions³¹, under Devanandan’s influence there developed an increasing emphasis on the outward journey into the world of the Christians. Such emphasis directed the CISRS group of thinkers into the analysis of social trends to discern their theological importance.

The sociological understanding thus attempted necessitated political, economic, religious and ethical analyses and naturally paved the way for interpreting the services that the Church was to render to the society. *Diakonia* became the prophetic role played by the Church in her *lokasamgraha*-mission. All the service of the churches fit in as “the ministry of reconciliation” rendered by the Church in mission to the “whole network of human relationships which we call society”³². Such service or ministry is offered primarily in terms of meeting actual human needs wherever necessary, but it should also fulfil God’s ultimate purpose for humans. Hence in the theology developed by PD Devanandan and his CISRS group of thinkers, a triad of components hold together as the task of mission: service (*diakonia*), preaching (*kerygma*) and fellowship (*koinonia*)³³. Christian ministry then should incorporate all three and theological education should adapt its curriculum to train the people of God for all three components. Thus ‘ministry’ is interpreted not only as the role played by the ordained clergy, but varieties of service done in the name of Christ and on behalf of the Church.

In his study of the contributions of CISRS to the development of Christian Social Thought in India, Godwin Shiri indicates that whereas MM Thomas took the aspect of social action and gave leadership as Devanandan’s successor, the area of inter-religious dialogue and the exploration of ‘seeking and finding’ of God in other religions remained undeveloped after the premature death of Devanandan³⁴. Stanly Samartha contributed leadership to whatever did develop in the later decades. But the area needs further exploration in our land of religiosity and religious plurality and a number of Indian Christian thinkers are seriously working toward this end today.

References :

1. See Stephen Andrew Morton, “PD Devanandan, MM Thomas and the Task of Indigenous Theology”, Ph.D., Thesis, Nottingham University, 1981, pp25f.

- Henceforth this thesis is referred "Morton". Morton refers to Devanandan's writings between 1931-35 and to MM Thomas' comment in Herbert Jai Singh's *Inter Religious Dialogue*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1967, p5.
2. Morton, p27. DT Nites alludes to this change as due to his first wife's death by suicide in 1937.
 3. M M Thomas, *In Memory of Devanandan*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1962; "Editorial: Life Together", *RS*, March 1964, p6.
 4. Robin HS Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras: CLS, 1969, p197.
 5. Devasahayam, Sudarisanam, GV Job, et.al., *Rethinking Christianity in India*, Madras: Hogarth Press, 1938.
 6. Devanandan, "The Rangoon Quadrennial Conference of the SCM of India, Burma and Ceylon", *Young Men of India*, 1938, p36. See Morton, p30.
 7. Devanandan, "The Challenge of Hinduism", *NCCR*, 1992, p183.
 8. Devanandan, "Repot from the Christian Institute for the Study of Society", *NCCR*, 1951, p323.
 9. See E Stanley Jones, "The Kingdom of God and the Church", *NCCR*, 1939, p305; "On the Tambaram Conference", *The Guardian*, 23-2-1939, p.102.
 10. Morton, pp 38f.
 11. See the Conference Findings in Marcus Ward, *Our Theological Task*, Madras: CLS, 1946.
 12. See DA Thangasamy, *The Theology of Chenchiah, with selections from his writings*, Madras: CLS for CISRS, 1960.
 13. See Eric J Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith*, London: SCM, 1977, pp120f. He quotes Sudarisanam, Devasahayam GV Job et.al., *Rethinking Christianity in India*, Madras: Hogarth Press, 1938, pp6, 8f. cf. Bengt Hoffman, *Christian Social Thought in India, 1947-1962*, Bangalore: CISRS, 1967, p47. Morton, p46.
 14. "Ministry of Reconciliation", Devanandan Archives, UTC Library, Bangalore.
 15. Gita III:20 and III:25 refer to *lokasamgraha*. The script from SRadhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita* (translation and notes), London: George Allen and Unwin, 1958, pp139, 141:

III:20 Karmanai 'vahi samsiddhim asthita janakadayah lokasamgraham eve
'pi sampas 'yan kartum arhasi

III:25 Saktah karmany avidvamso yatha kurvanti bharata kuryad vidvams
tatha'saktas cikirsur lokasamgraham

and its meaning interpreted into English by Panikkar in his *The Vedic Experience: Mantramajari*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977, pp428f is as follows: "It was only by working that Janaka and others attained perfection. In the same way you in your turn should work for the *maintenance of the world*"; "The ignorant act from attachment to work; the wise however, should act, but in a spirit of detachment, with desire to *maintain the world order*". Cf. Morton, pp56f. Quoted from Panikkar, op cit., pp881, 427, KT Telang and LD Barrett in WDP Hill, *The Bhagavad - Gita*, Oxford: OUP, 1928; EJ Thomas, *The Bhagavad - Gita*, London: John Murray, 1959; RC Zaehner, *Hindu Scriptures*, London: JM Dent and Sons, 1972.
 16. Radhakrishnan, *op.cit.*, pp69 and 139
 17. Sri Aurobindo Ghose, *The Life Divine*, II, p684 See PD Devanandan & MM

- Thomas (eds.) *Christian Participation in Nation Building*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1960 P.viii
18. See PD Devanandan, *Resurgent Hinduism : Review of Modern Movements*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1958, p5. Cf. Morton, p55
 19. See Nalini Devanandan & MM Thomas (eds.), *Preparation for Dialogue*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1964, p149. Cf. Morton, p64
 20. PD Devanandan, "Christian and Non-Christian Faiths", *IJT*, 1957, p78. Morton, p72.
 21. PD Devanandan, *Resurgent Hinduism, op.cit.*, p8
 22. Robin HS Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, Madras : CLS, 1969, p203
 23. N Devanandan & MM Thomas (eds.) *Preparation for Dialogue, op.cit.*, p191
 24. PD Devanandan, "Recent New Testament Scholarship and the Indian Church", *NCCR*, 1951, p486
 25. Morton reports this from his personal interview with Keithahn, p78
 26. Cf. Morton, pp85f and PD Devanandan, "The New Creation" and "The Household of God", 1958, UTC Archives, Bangalore; *Preparation for Dialogue, op.cit.*, p169,
 27. For a concise description of "Anonymous Christianity", see EJ Sharpe, *Faith Meets Faith, op.cit.*, Chapter9, pp118-131. Sharpe succinctly traces the development of this concept from the "sadly repetitive" and "romantically impressionistic" work of Raymond Panikkar: *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, 1964; Karl Rahner "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions" in *Theological Investigations, Volume V*, English translation, Helicon Press and Darton, Longman and Todd, 1966; Anita Roper, *The Anonymous Christian*, English Translation, Sheed and Ward, 1966; Eugene Hillman, *The Wider Ecumenism*, 1968; and criticisms on this concept in H van Straelen, *The Catholic Encounter with World Religions*, 1966 and Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindavan*, 1969.
 28. Morton, p73
 29. *Preparation for Dialogue, op.cit.*, p118
 30. Morton, p90. See Devanandan, "The New Creation", Devanandan Archives, UTC Library, Bangalore. He wrote: "New Creation becomes a shattering reality when a man confronts God in Christ, and is apprehended by God", PD Devanandan, *Christian Concern in Hinduism*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1961, p124
 31. Whereas Devanandan did not deny the conversion of a Hindu to Christ, he disagreed with the emphasis on "a shift in physical community" "often characterised by the appropriation of different social customs, manner of dress, and dwelling in the mission compound". Morton, p91
 32. Cf. PD Devanandan, "The Household of God" and "The Ministry of Reconciliation", Devanandan Archives.
 33. Cf. PD Devanandan, *Our Task Today: Revision of Evangelistic Concern*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1958 p16; and *Christian Issues in Southern Asia*, New York : Friendship Press, 1963, p118.
 34. See Godwin Shiri, *Christian Social Thought in India : 1962-1977*, Madras : CLS for CISRS, 1982, p.193