

CHRONICLE

Indian Theological Association Annual Seminar

Political Theology in the Indian Context

The annual seminar of the Indian Theological Association (ITA) was held at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, India from July 31 to August 2, 1981. The theme of this annual meeting was "Political Theology in the Indian Context." Thirty five of the Indian Catholic theologians together with some of their Christian colleagues interested in the same field took part in the discussions and deliberations of the Seminar. The meeting focussed its attention on the creative and critical task of the Church and of theology in transforming our society with the total liberation of every man and woman in India.

Discussions were based on six main papers presented at the meeting: "Religious Ideologies and Political Change" (Dr. S. Kappen), "Church's Involvement in the Political life of India" (Prof. Cyriac Thomas), "Forces at work in Indian Politics Today" (G. S. Reddi M. P.), "Church's Role in the transformation of the Developing Countries" (Rev. E. Bareto), "Political Ideas and Involvement of the Old Testament Prophets" (Dr. Paul Kalluveetil), "Christian Involvement in Politics Today and Tomorrow" (Dr. C. Duraisingh). At the end of the Seminar the following statement had been released as the common expression of the participants regarding the main issues that came up during their discussions (*Editor*).

Statement of the Indian Theological Association (1981)

The annual meeting of the Indian Theological Association held at Dharmaram College, Bangalore, July 31-August 2, 1981 reflected in the light of the Gospel on the political reality of India today with its structures of oppression and exploitation and the man made misery of the masses. Jesus of the Gospel, the way he encountered God, his commitment and style of life, and his efforts for the liberation of the whole man challenged us in our deliberations.

1) We reflected on the political role exercised by the Church in India, in the past and tried to analyse the motives behind such political involvement. In a political situation where communalism is in the foreground, Christians also organized themselves into communities and often degenerated into communal groups. In this respect the safeguards provided by law for the rights of minorities were called upon for the survival and well being of Christian communities. Even while the great majority of Christians suffered and still suffer under the oppressive structures, certain well off sections in their preoccupation to defend their own rights have not been adequately sensitive to the needs and rights of the underprivileged and down trodden. Owing to the concern about religious and temporal interests the Church has not wholeheartedly involved itself in the national struggle for liberation. Loaded with a theology and outlook conditioned by the culture and lifestyle of the elite, it did not reflect upon or interpret the actual political realities to the people. The Church was practically ineffective as an instrument of social change in India and even an obstacle, and it has not extended sufficient support to the process of social change initiated by others.

2) The political life in India today is marked by the conflicts created by caste, unprincipled party politics, disproportionate influence exerted by money, the domination imposed by bureaucracy, manipulation of mass media, widespread corruption and the opportunism of individuals and groups. In these we must recognize symptoms of a deeper malaise, namely the denial of the real humanity of man. There has hardly been any powerful protest raised against these abuses, especially since religious leaders and theologians are not free from the influence of different ideologies and trends.

3) Today taking into account the political forces at work we should focus our attention on the human community as a whole and emphasize the real values that sustain it. We affirm that God is to be met not only in the written word of the Bible but also in the people's history and their socio-political struggles. The proclamation of the Gospel that is not addressed to the political reality of the poor and the victims of oppression is not the proclamation of the saving word of God. Hence the Church cannot be indifferent to politics, and if it takes the Gospel seriously in the light of modern exegesis and hermeneutics, it has no other option than to identify itself with the cause of the exploited and the suffering masses of our nation.

4) Reflecting on the Gospel in this socio-political context we should endeavour to build up a genuinely human community of persons sensitive to the needs and aspirations of all human beings.

(i) First of all the very concepts like church and community taken for granted from the past should be questioned anew to purge them of all triumphalism, authoritarianism, hierarchism and preference for the status quo and bring out the idea of God's people struggling together for the total liberation of man from all kinds of shackles, economic, social, political, cultural and spiritual.

(ii) Though in the past Christians have strongly reacted against Marxist ideology and its political and social expressions, they have done very little critical examination of Capitalism, its profit centred ideology and its various ways of world domination, and oppression of the great majority of humanity. We must be aware of the subtle ways in which power is grabbed by vested interests, often under the pretence of the ideals of love, justice and non-violence, and actual structures of violence are created and perpetuated. Church and theology must witness to the Gospel and provide effective norms by which every particular system and movement may be judged.

(iii) The way the Church should fight the structures of power is not merely by inserting its own members into positions of power and meeting power with power, but more by taking a creatively critical stand about all ideologies and institutions and the state itself. Like the prophets of the Old Testament we must make people aware of the structures of oppression and exploitation.

(iv) The Church should continue in the Indian context the healing and liberating action of Christ. The Church leaders like the bishops, clergy and laity in public positions should inspire the nation with the dynamism of the Christian vision and speak out on various issues that affect the life of the people. Effective steps should be taken to train leaders who are truly imbued with the basic human and Christian values and rise above particular interests and interest groups. The laity should be enabled to fulfil its appropriate leading role in the different fields of secular life. All should be made aware of their political responsibilities so that they can act according to their own conscience without being dictated to by those in authority.

(v) We must unequivocally proclaim that the present world-wide poverty and the everwidening gap between rich and poor is a man-made phenomenon and really evil. It calls for repentance and atonement in the spirit of the all-round renewal called for by Vatican II.

(vi) In this we have to pay special attention to the plight of the millions of the poor in our country whose condition has only been worsening and never improving even after independence. Our concern goes out specially to the Christians who come from the scheduled caste background and suffer doubly the effects of exploitation on account of their faith.

(vii) The theologian in India has a special task to learn from the findings of the human sciences like sociology and psychology and politics and interpret the political reality in the light of faith pluralistically according to the diversity of our regional and social contexts.

5) Theology arising as it does from a genuine encounter with God in the actual situation of human suffering must maintain the link with actual experience in the ongoing reflection on the saving presence of God in the world.