

## RELIGION AND POLITICAL POWER

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We begin our reflection on the inter-relationship between politics and religion with a sense of disillusionment that is widely prevalent among those who consider this question. It is widely held that the political process and institutions obtaining in most parts of Asia have failed to respond adequately to the aspirations of liberation of people. Many factors have contributed to this crisis. We will mention three important ones.

### **i) The challenge to secularism by resurgent religious movements.**

The idea of secularism, the foundation of democracy is challenged at every point by the dominance of religions and their institutions.

Traditional cultures in Asia have been religious cultures, in which there was an unbroken unity between society, politics and religion. "It has been a communitarian society, a decentralized socio-political existence."<sup>1</sup> Religion provided the integrating principle, and both social structure and political authority were legitimised by it. The break-up of this traditional integration has been a conspicuous aspect of the modern awakening of people to the ideas of justice and freedom and technological rationality, the foundations of a secular framework.

The reactions of religions to these changes are complex. An extreme one is the so-called 'traditionalist' approach. It is characterised by a refusal to accept this break-up of traditional integration and the relative autonomy of society and politics, and a desperate effort to bring them again under the tutelage of religion. The communal ideologies in India are following this line. This kind of revivalism fails to see the personalistic and dynamic elements of the emerging situation and very often ends up as a struggle to preserve the interest of the elite which had traditionally enjoyed all the privileges.

The other extreme mode of approach is that of 'modernists'. They find the emerging 'secular' state as absolute and anti-religious. Often, it stands for an uncritical acceptance of western technology, western politics and western style of life. Its anti-religious stance is the legacy of the so-called modern scientific culture in which all experiences of reality are reduced to definable and quantifiable commodities. What is 'usable' and 'marketable' is valuable. Reason is reduced to technical reason and all levels of human experience are ruthlessly manipulated. We (the urban intellectuals) have been too long under the tutelage of western rationality, and have remained insensitive to the religious sensibilities of the majority of our people. This has failed, as has been proved not only through the experiences of Third World countries but also those of Europe.

What we need is a dynamic reinterpretation of the past, taking seriously the new elements of change. The religions should see the relevance of the new secular framework that is emerging. It is based

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cultural context of communalism in India' in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bombay, Vol.XXIV, No.2, Jan.14, 1989.

on certain values which they all together can affirm the values of justice, equality and participation. Of course, what is sometimes dangerous is a kind of secular attitude that is closed to religion. Absolutising elements in politics can be termed inhuman and oppressive. A pluralistic outlook is necessary as a viable form of relating one religion to another on the basis of shared values and goals. “We work not for Christian culture, but for an open, secular, pluralistic culture, informed by and open to the insights of many faiths, including Christian faith.” (M.M.Thomas).

In a pluralistic context religions should co-operate in strengthening the secular/civic basis of politics. Christians in India are called upon to accept this responsibility and not to pursue communal politics that is preoccupied with their own interests.

## ii) **The struggle for ethnic identity and justice.**

The struggle by different ethnic groups for their identity and justice has brought serious challenges to the democratic institutions. It has to be discussed against two conflicting developments. Threatened by the emergence of modern Nation-State and the ideas of secularism, some sections in all religions assert a fundamentalist posture in the major religions. Under the guise of identity struggle, the fundamentalists, particularly in major religions, are creating a volatile situation. The majority community wants to perpetuate its dominance by controlling the political process through its militant organisations. The Hindutva philosophy of the BJP-RSS-VHP<sup>2</sup> combine is the best example. The process has created a sense of insecurity among the minority communities and marginal groups. This form of resurgence will only strengthen the oppressive forces and we should reject it.

At the same time marginal groups like Dalits and tribals are seeking a new identity for themselves based on their past religion and cultures which had been suppressed or destroyed by dominant communities. In their struggle against historical as well as contemporary process of domination, the Dalits and indigenous groups become conscious of their identity as people. Reflection on mission should be related to this newly gained awareness of marginalised groups.

The Church in the past has been ambiguous in regard to its response to the identity question. Christian mission for sure has enormously contributed to the social transformation of indigenous people. But it has been insensitive to people’s struggle for cultural identity. The Church has often projected a view of uniformity that suppresses all differences.

We need to affirm that plurality is God’s gift and diversity is in the very structure of God’s creation. We are called upon to celebrate God’s gift of plurality and diversity.

If the struggle for Dalit and tribal identity is the demand to secure the rightful space of indigenous people in the wider human discourse and relationship, then it should be accepted as integral to God’s

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<sup>2</sup> BJP : Bharatiya Janata Party – a political wing of the Hindu fundamentalists, working closely with RSS.

RSS : The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh is a Fundamentalist group within Hinduism.

VHP : Vishwa Hindu Parishad All these organisations work hand in hand.

purposes for them. The theological link between Christian faith and the struggle for identity should be strengthened.

The struggle for identity is also a struggle for justice and participation. This gives a concrete and distinct focus for our struggle. Here the biblical tradition of faith can make significant contribution. The prophets were uncompromising on their stand on justice. They rejected any pattern of relationship that fails to ensure justice, as contrary to God's will. I believe that this focus on justice in our identity struggle gives us a concrete direction as well as a new theological meaning for it.

**iii) The pressure of global economic system on national politics.**

With the disappearance of the socialist world, the Third World countries have entered a new phase in their development saga. They are now totally and completely dominated by the financial institutions and global market engineered by the First World. The gap between the "rich" and the "poor" countries has become greater, and this gap is no longer a relative surmountable gap, but absolute in terms of access to key factors of production such as capital (including technology).

Globalisation and modernisation through technological growth have brought many serious problems. Increasing marginalisation is the inevitable consequence of a capital intensive urban-centred model of growth. The new economic policies introduced in India, allegedly at the behest of IMF and World Bank, will not alter the basic pattern of development that has been inimical to the marginalised. There is no doubt that we need to link ourselves to the global market system and that we should clear the rot that has set in the public sector. But an unfettered growth of multi-nationals and the emphasis on foreign trade are not conducive for a pattern of development that is oriented to the needs of the poor.

The impact of globalisation process, more especially the structural adjustment programmes and the Liberalisation policies, on the State and indirectly on the democratic process is a matter of grave concern. Ninan Koshy writes: "The new global reality has critically altered the nature and is steadily altering of the state. More significantly the process is subverting and circumscribing the powers, reach and even the orientation of the state. This has not in any sense liberated people from the oppression and exploitation of the dominant power structures. It has only substituted their subjugation from the more direct, easily identifiable and confrontable forces to indirect often invisible and always remote centres of domination."<sup>3</sup>

The State has abdicated its social responsibility; and follows the dictates of the market and other global systems.

**Strengthening Civil Society**

The crisis of democracy is linked with the crisis of meaning we face today in our society. Globalisation which is a market process survives because of its ability to convert all realities into commodities. Therefore, in a market society, people, land, knowledge, faith, religion and politics are measured on values scale of money. This means that those realities which refuse to assume or submit

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<sup>3</sup> 'Political Dimensions and Implications of Globalisation' in *Voices from the Third World*, Bangalore, Vol.XX, No.2, Dec.1997, p.31.

themselves to be valued in monetary terms as commodities have no place in society. The concepts of freedom, equality and compassion, heteronomy and other which meaning systems have lost their legitimacy and spiritual strength within the prevailing market principle.

The significance of civil society should be seen against this process of commodification and curtailment of meaning systems. Civil society is traditionally used as the reality of society which precedes and underline the order of State, the common will of the citizens, the moral commitment which is required for the functioning of the State (Lukas Vischer: Peoples participation in building a just and sustainable society).<sup>4</sup> This moral substratum is distorted by the market process and the formal political process of parties and legislatures etc., succumb to the pressures of global economic institutions. Civil society in this situation should be collectives that raise critical voice against the State and becomes the voice of those who do not have political authority. “They do not represent the expression of a common moral will of society but a form of resistance against an ideology which is perceived as explorative and restructure” (Lukas Vischer). These movements are significant developments. They need to be strengthened for altering the present political process. Global networks as we have seen already are generating new political culture. They challenge us to live by plurality of culture, demand justice as a pre-requisite for meaningful human solidarity.

NGOs are one of the agents to bring about an altered society. They are, however, committed to specific issues and often do not develop an alternative vision of strength. But they confront the dominant society with their critique of the present model of society. It is imperative that we encourage the dialogue, which sometimes take the form of confrontation, between such collectives and the wildest of the power. Alas! In some situation the space for such dialogue is shrinking! Today only by such dialogue can the civil society be strengthened and democratic values can be preserved.

### Church's Response

In this context the political witness of the Church is complex. One of the temptations the church in India faces is to form itself into a group that competes with other caste or religious groups to fight for the right political equations without addressing itself to the creation of a civil society based on secular values. The nexus between the elites of different religions continues to oppress the people. All this compels us to search for a new political culture that is rooted in the experience of the poor.

The conviction underlining this presentation is that liberative sources of religion can be mobilised to build a new culture. Sifting through the elite distortion of religions and finding our way through the grandiose edifice built by the dominant classes, we need to recover the essential dynamism of religious faiths. This can be done when poor and the marginalised themselves appropriate these traditions and if we make ‘preferential options for the poor’.

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<sup>4</sup> A paper presented at a Consultation in Geneva in June, 1999. (Unpublished).

The transition from religion (even the liberative form of it to politics) is still a moot question. But movements of indigenous and other grass root level people, environmentalists, and feminists are already generating a new political culture based on spiritual and social visions of their tradition. They challenge us to live by plurality of culture; they demand justice as a pre-requisite for a meaningful form of human solidarity, they urge us to commit to a set of communitarian and bonding values necessary for the building up of human community; they show us the need of a viable eco-system in order to survive. How do we channelise these so as to alter the present political process? Only by establishing a stranger link with these movements can the church fulfil its mission in the present-day context.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate some of the concrete steps already mentioned about the Church's task:

- a) The Church is called to strengthen the secular/civil base of politics. All religions should be challenged to evolve a theology that articulates the liberative and human values of their faith which provide a basis for responsible participation in the secular realms.
- b) The Church should deepen its commitment to the poor and the marginalised, ensuring justice for all, especially the weaker sections. It should involve in, with other movements, the struggle of Dalits, tribals and women for their dignity and freedom. Mission should be reformulated as liberative solidarity.
- c) The State should be called upon to be accountable to justice. A prophetic criticism against the government when it perpetuates violence and oppression is unavoidable for responsible participation.
- d) The Church should join with others in evolving a paradigm of development that is ecologically sound. It should reject a value system and life-style that destroy our culture. This also means strengthening those communities and traditions which affirm life and its relationships.