

Time was when all thinking in the Catholic Church was monolithic. The Pope spoke the word, and the rest, from bishops to laypersons said Amen. The result was perfect union of minds and wills. As for theological reflection, it followed the line of incestuous circularity, confined as it was within the four walls of seminaries. Then came the Second Vatican Council, which opened the Church's doors to the wider world of other religions and ideologies. With that, the monolith crumbled. Different voices began to be heard among Christians about God, man, and the universe. Gradually, pluralism in theology came to be accepted. And now, with the emergence of liberation theology, pluralism has given way to polarisation. So much so that the official Church now sees in the new theology a threat to its very survival, as may be seen from the recent Instruction issued by the Sacred Congregation for Doctrine and the Faith on 'Certain Aspects of Liberation Theology.'

Indian Christianity did not remain impervious to the new development. From the '70s committed Christians started educating and organising the tribals and the poorer classes, rural and urban. In this they drew inspiration from the Bible, the teachings of the Vatican Council, and the so-called social Encyclicals which recognise the struggle for justice as a valid expression of faith. But once in the field of action, they experienced the contradiction between the new commitment and the kind of theology they had inherited. At a gathering of activists held at Bangalore in the mid-'70s the request was made for a more relevant interpretation of the message of Jesus. Thus was started a series of tracts called *Anawim* for circulation among socially committed Christians throughout India. In 1977 appeared *Jesus and Freedom* by the present writer, which provoked the ire of the concerned Vatican secretariat which sought in vain to have it revised in line with orthodoxy. In the new theological venture significant contributions came from professors of theology like Samuel Rayan and George Soares Prabhu in the form of *Anawim* leaflets, articles in periodicals, and papers presented at seminars. All this generated a wave of rethinking in the Church. Similar developments also took place in the other Christian Churches, which, in fact, were traditionally more open to the social dimension of the Gospels than their Catholic counterpart. A pioneer in this field was M M Thomas who, though himself not a liberation theologian, had already paved the way for a more relevant theology with his many writings on Christian presence in secular India.

The upsurge of radicalism found concrete expression in groups of like-minded priests, nuns, and lay

persons, particularly in Kerala. Such groups have become rallying points for a Christian praxis markedly divergent from the traditional one. That they are a force to reckon with is clear from the fact that they are being made the object of repressive action on the part of the official Churches. The faithful are warned from pulpits against the pernicious contagion of liberation theology; troublesome priests and nuns are summarily transferred to remote areas or otherwise silenced. Pressure is being brought by bishops on superiors of religious congregations to have the radicals held in check or removed from their dioceses. Editors of periodicals sympathetic to the new thinking are replaced by those who toe the official line.

What is all this row about, is the query one hears from uninformed

the hope that God would soon come and usher in a new age of human fullness when the poor will take possession of the earth, their hunger and thirst for justice will be satisfied, when humans everywhere will become brothers and sisters to one another, when prisons will be pulled down and the inmates set free, and the sorrowing will have every tear wiped away. But, for that hope to become reality men and women had to co-operate, reorienting their lives in tune with the future envisioned. Hence his journeyings up and down Palestine calling upon his bearers to repent and believe in the 'good news' that the absolute future of mankind was erupting in the hear-and-now of history.

Utopias threaten no one so long as they do not become a reality. But with the Galilean prophet word did

cause it has come a long way from its own prophetic moorings. The process started early enough and can be discerned in the New Testament itself. What set it in motion was a non-event. Jesus died, but the longed-for new heaven and new earth did not come. The world continued much the same as before. The result was an anguishing crisis of faith.

The solution that eventually came to stay was to believe the Kingdom had already come in Jesus and that in him was the fullness of truth and grace. With that, the community of believers fixed their gaze less on the future to be fashioned than on the past to be preserved. From being disciples and followers of Jesus, they became worshippers of a meta-historical Christ. Parallely, the community came to be looked upon as

RELIGION/SEBASTIAN KAPPEN

IN SEARCH OF A NEW GOD

We have, in the recent past, carried several reports on the rumblings within the church in Kerala. With the orthodoxy facing the onslaught of the reformists, who speak the language of liberation theology. Who believe that it is the responsibility of the clergy to stand up against the forces of reaction and defend the oppressed and the vulnerable.

Father Sebastian Kappen is one such courageous priest, who has faced the wrath of the orthodoxy, while standing up for the cause of the underdog.

Here, he speaks about the need for a new approach.

One that would bring the church closer to the people, and identify with their causes, their concerns.

Christians and non-Christians alike. Is Christianity disintegrating? Is communism infiltrating Christianity in order to explode it from within? Or is it that the CIA, in Marxist-Christian clothing, is at its game of pre-empting Soviet expansion in the Third World? Or again, could it be that conversionism is raising its head again, this time under the guise of liberating the oppressed?

To those who entertain such suspicions and fears the plain truth might come as an anti-climax: what liberation theologians are saying and doing today is just what that unknown prophet from Nazareth said and did two thousand years ago. I say 'unknown', for today the Prophet lies buried beneath accumulated layers of interpretations, laws, procedures, bank-accounts, and the paraphernalia of a state-apparatus.

The focal point of Jesus's life was

become deed. Committed to the project of a future of wholeness and freedom, he had to take a stand in regard to the realities of the present. Hence his option for 'those who labour and are burdened', meaning the working class. Hence, too, his denunciation of the rich who sought to serve God and Mammon at the same time; of the Roman rulers who lorded it over their subjects and made them feel the weight of their authority; of the high priests who turned God's temple into a market place and a den of thieves,

What liberation theologians from Latin America to India are doing is to recapture the liberating message and practice of the murdered prophet. Why then does the official church view it with hostility? Be-

the Kingdom on earth, and outsiders as children of darkness. Thus was born the theology of conversion and the mission of conquest that held sway till very recent times.

But how could the church be equated with the reign of God when among its members there was no love, but there was injustice, avarice and greed? The answer was to spiritualise the notion of the Kingdom. Thus the apostle Paul would argue that 'in Christ', that is, on the spiritual plane, 'there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female' (Gal. 3:28), though in reality discriminations based on race, class and sex persisted. Over the centuries such dualistic thinking would provide the Church both a convenient alibi for sordid involvement in the affairs of the world and an excuse for inaction in the face of manifest inhumanity. It is still the

dominant thinking in the Catholic Church as is clear from the Vatican document mentioned above.

The dislocation of the focus of faith from the future to the past has had another fateful consequence. If God spoke his last word two millennia ago, he is no more needed and might as well retire from the scene, entrusting that word to his vicegerents for them to interpret and hand down from generation to generation. Thus was effected what one might call the primitive accumulation of religious power by the teaching authority of the church. Understandably, in the new dispensation there is no more room for prophets. Instead, there will be priests and teachers galore.

This whole development must be seen against the background of Christianity's expansion from the

the Gospel; the sects of Waldenses, Anabaptists, and Hussites who called upon their contemporaries to return to the days of early Christian Communism when property was held in common, and distribution made to each according to his need; Thomas Muenzer who took up the cause of the oppressed peasants while the Catholic Church sided with the aristocracy, and Luther with the emerging bourgeoisie. Mention must also be made of the monastic movement which arose as a protest against the wealth and worldliness of the Church. Which shows that beneath the imposing superstructure of rituals and institutions there always lay hidden the explosive power of the Gospel ready to burst into flame under favourable conditions. And liberation theology is just that—the prophetic message

undertook to write my doctoral thesis on the Early Writings of Marx, it was with the explicit intention of equipping myself to fight, on my return, the then communist regime in Kerala. So little did I realise then that the venture would involve me in a mental revolution. Grappling with the texts of Marx brought me down from the rarified world of Aristotelian concepts to the realities of everyday life. It taught me to think from below, from the heart of the fragmented, fractured world around. It was Marx who led me to a critique of the Christian tradition and thereby to an encounter with the Jesus of the Gospels. Paradoxically, it was also Marx who enabled me to recognise his limits and to integrate into his theoretical frame insights from some of the other schools of thought and philosophy.

of labour and subserve the imperialist interests of the United States. The system of dependent capitalism that came into being excluded the masses from all social wealth, condemning millions to unemployment and starvation. In most countries, the oligarchy, abetted by the CIA and the multinational companies, set up repressive regimes based on the perverse ideology of 'national security.' The common people were denied all political rights; political parties and trade unions were suppressed; and 'death-commandos' let loose on the opposition. Religion itself was sought to be brought under the control of the State to serve as a weapon against international communism. The irony of it all is that in Latin America both the oppressors and the oppressed, the elite and the masses, belong to the Christian fold.

It was to meet this impossible situation of organised inhumanity that the poorer Christians formed themselves into 'base communities' and initiated a process of collective reflection on the biblical message, this time from the point of view of their own situation of misery. This led them to a rediscovery of the living God of history who called them to dignity and freedom, as of old he had called upon the Hebrews to shake off the yoke of slavery in Egypt and set out on the long march to the Promised Land. From the 'base communities' and their pastors poised for a new exodus there arose new Moseses and prophets and theologians of liberation.

The new theology effected an 'epistemological rupture' with the old. Whereas the latter started from reflection on the dogmas and by way of their application came down to practical life, the former took off from below, that is, from the practice of liberation, and in its light proceeded to grasp the meaning of the Bible. This methodological reversal has had far-reaching consequences. The new wine burst the old wineskins of dogma and tradition, causing jitters in Christian circles used to a God broken-in and made to serve their interests. Theology of liberation pointed an accusing finger at those Church leaders who maintained close links with international capitalism and oppressive regimes. All this has had repercussions extending beyond Latin America to the countries of the First World and to Asia and Africa:

As far as India is concerned, liberation theology is likely to be in a low key in the years ahead, and this is due to the specific conditions obtaining here. The 'parties of revolution' have been tamed and absorbed into the bourgeois politics of power and expediency, to a point where they scarcely differ from the 'parties of order'. Gandhism is today a spent force being no more than a convenient ritual. The prospect of fresh revolutionary energies spring-



The fishermen's struggle in Trivandrum was supported by the new theologians

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Palestinian to the Hellenistic world, where it came under the impact of dualistic philosophies and 'mystery cults.' Accommodation to Graeco-Roman culture made the new religion attractive to intellectuals and the upper classes, who eventually came to dominate what was originally a movement of the disprivileged and the marginated. The decisive rupture with its prophetic past occurred when in the fourth century Christianity was adopted as the state religion by emperor Constantine, thus opening an era of unholy alliance between the Cross and the imperial Sword. However, from the beginning there were dissenting men and women, such as Montanus in the second century who denounced the growing institutionalisation of the Church; Jerome who bemoaned the confusion of Church and State as a fall from the purity of

of Jesus come alive. But why today?

Liberation theology could not have arisen had it not been for the fruitful confrontation between the Gospel and the philosophy of Marx. This has been recognised by no less a person than Gustavo Guitierrez, the father of Latin American liberation theology. In India, too, all those who are making any meaningful contribution to a more relevant theology are persons who have in one way or other been influenced by Marxism, while the majority stagnate in the backwaters of tradition-bound thinking. The philosophy of Marx provides the theologian not only the tools to understand the world in which he lives but also to discern between the historically conditioned and the perennially valid in his own religious tradition. Pardon an autobiographical digression. Way back in 1959 when I

For a theology of liberation to emerge it is not enough that the Gospel encounters Marxism. It must also answer the felt needs of a people. And the need for a rethinking of Christian faith and practice was most intensely felt in Latin America. Here we have a country rich in natural resources, made the richer with the blood of the natives massacred by the conquerors from Spain and Portugal. These divided the land between themselves on the principle of 'might is right'. Today Latin America's wealth is in the hands of an oligarchy consisting of big landlords, the army, and the bureaucracy. In the '60s, the ruling classes invited American multinational companies to come in and invest in key sectors of the economy. The national economy was so structured as to suit the international division

ing up from the subterranean consciousness of the masses is not bright either. The power of the Establishment to neutralise dissent knows no bounds. With such great success does it employ the technology of misinformation that the structures of oppression assume legitimacy in the eyes of the oppressed themselves. Worse, the fissiparous tendencies inherent in caste and religion hinder the formation of a collective agent of transformative action. Which means there is little in the contemporary situation from which the theologian of liberation can draw inspiration. He or she can only fall back on the resources of his or her own faith and on the conviction that the basic problems facing our people cannot be solved without a radical restructuring of Indian society.

Seen from another angle, the Indian context is particularly suited to the birth of a liberation theology that will be more radical in its sweep and more universal in its validity than similar theologies elsewhere. For, unlike his counterparts in Latin America or Africa, the theologian here has to carry on his search for a more relevant Christianity in the context of a religiously pluralist society. In Latin America, Christians, being the majority, can on their own initiate collective action. This is not possible in India where they are a small minority. In order to act effectively on society, they have necessarily to join hands with like-minded Hindus, Muslims, and Marxists, forming wider communities. This, in fact, is what is happening wherever Christians have come forward to organise the poor. A recent example is the fishermen's movement in Kerala where people of different religious persuasions came together to fight for a common secular cause, though the initiative came from Christians. This sets the pattern for all Christian-social involvement in future.

Working together with other communities and constantly exposed to the doubts, queries, and challenges of people of other persuasions, the theologian will be forced to subject his own faith to a ruthless criticism. He will be led to doubt the truth especially of such beliefs and doctrines as virtually downgrade non-Christians to second class citizens in the kingdom of God. An instance is the claim that Jesus Christ is the fullness of revelation, and the Church its sole accredited depository. That a revision of such exclusive claims is now going on may be seen from the fact that at a gathering of theologians in Delhi, the majority confessed to having reservations about the traditional understanding of the divinity of Christ. The theologian will also be wary of such mental constructs as 'Cosmic Christ', 'Mystical Body of Christ', and 'anonymous Christians'. These

constitute so many subtle forms of ideological imperialism in as much as they help annex, by an act of semantic aggression, all men and women of good will to the Christian fold, as though to offset the bankruptcy of conversionism.

To Christians involved in the struggle for a just social order, the prevalent notion of the Church as a worshipping community gathered around a neutral Christ dispensing his favours to the exploiter and the exploited alike becomes problematic. They will rather view the Church as the fellowship of Jesus's disciples who seek the kingdom of God and its justice first. In it there will be no place for persons who cling to the status quo for the sole reason that they happen to be its beneficiaries. Only those among the rich and the powerful will belong to

energies of the new age embedded in society at large. To this end it will bring into being wider, open communities without however seeking to exercise hegemony over them. Similarly, the Eucharist will become once again what Jesus originally meant it to be: a prophetic gesture that anticipates, in symbol and reality, the new humanity of the future. In a word, an Indian theology of liberation will liberate the Church from its ingrown sectarianism.

As faith becomes radicalised and bodies forth in action, it will increasingly pose a threat to the current social practice of the Churches. It has been the experience of Christian activists for the last two decades that action for justice inevitably brings them into conflict with the official Churches. Why? Because, in the end, all radical action goes coun-

less to doubt the sincerity and dedication of the personnel involved. What causes concern is the fact that the structural links the Churches have with the powers that are generate an *operative theory* of general conformism, which is often at variance with official teaching itself. It is the hold this operative theory has on Church leaders that, more than anything else, explains their hostile reaction to liberation theology.

Will the emerging theology of liberation gather ever greater momentum and fulfil the promises it holds? The answer would depend, above all, on the intellectual integrity and prophetic courage of the theologian himself. He must vindicate his fundamental right to err and to ask unasked questions and tread unbeaten paths. He must at the same time be on his guard against the jet-age temptation of going in search of the one lost white sheep abroad while leaving the ninety-nine brown ones at home to shift for themselves. Nor may he delude himself into thinking that he can fashion a theology of liberation from within the insured existence of academic institutions. He must rather pitch his tent in the midst of ordinary people and share their joys and sorrows and struggles.

What is true of the theologian applies to theology as well. It cannot hang in the air, nor be a foreign body on Indian soil. It must insert itself in our cultural tradition, particularly in the tradition of dissent whose earliest and most powerful spokesman was the Buddha. He was the first to repudiate the caste system and the hegemony of the priestly class, the first to denounce the worship of gods and goddesses and spirits good and evil, the first to call upon his fellow humans to be each a light unto himself, the first to point out the economic roots of violence and anarchy, the first to envisage a future when the rule of kings will give way to the rule of *dharma*, the first to preach universal love as the eternal law of life. As such, the Buddha is the prototype par excellence of all theologians of liberation. Though his message of integral freedom was eventually co-opted, tamed, and rendered innocuous by a militant Brahminism, the culture of dissent he initiated could never be fully smothered. It would raise its head centuries later in the Bhakti movement of medieval India but only to succumb once again to the forces of reaction until in our own days it was moulded by the Mahatma into a powerful weapon in the struggle against colonial rule. It is only by merging with this tradition of creative protest and with the repressed culture of the tribals, the Harijans, and the poorer classes that the liberating message of Jesus will become a truly indigenous theology of liberation.



Sebastian Kappen: challenging orthodoxy

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it who are critical of their own role in perpetuating man's bondage to man. If the community has any preferential option it will be for the poor and the dispossessed, since these, as victims of injustice, have a greater stake in creating a society of equals. This by no means amounts to throwing overboard Jesus's teaching on universal love. On the contrary. Only by siding with the poor and joining in their struggles can the rich themselves be set free from the structures that dehumanise them.

In the new perspective, the Church will be an ex-centric community, with its centre outside itself in the reign of God to come. For the same reason, the only conversion it will consider essential is conversion to the Future hoped for. Its primary concern will be not its own numerical or institutional expansion but furthering the

ter to the socio-economic interests of the Churches themselves. Over the years, Indian Christianity has built up an imposing network of institutions and projects (under Catholic auspices alone over 10,000 institutions in 1977 and 6,700 projects between 1968 and 1973) requiring colossal financial investments. These secular enterprises involve the Churches in a three-fold dependence: on foreign donors, on the State, which alone can guarantee the inflow of foreign money and provide the needed legal infrastructure, and on the institutions of capitalism which the same enterprises patronise as buyers, sellers or investors. In addition, they create relations of dependence in the local community: of the laity on the clergy, of non-Christians on Christians. This is not to belittle the great contribution Christianity has made in the field of education and social service, much