

Serampore Convocation Address 1992

TRUTH BEYOND WORDS

(Metropolitan Paulos Mar Gregorios)

For a humble alumnus of the Senate of Serampore, it is a special honour to be asked to deliver the Convocation Address to the graduating students present. Permit me this time to address not only the students, but also the theological educators. I am grateful for the privilege.

Let me begin with the question: what is the task which we have assigned ourselves as a theological education and ministerial training community for India and neighbouring countries? Are we tempted to imitate secular universities or theological institutions of the west, imitate their curriculum and methods, and depend primarily on their recognition, rather than focusing on our task?

I understand our task in the Serampore community as primarily "seminarial", rather than academic. What does "seminarial" mean? It comes from Latin *seminarium* which literally means a "seed-bed", which is a well watered and fertilised plot of land where young saplings are nurtured for transplantation to the field where they would eventually grow and bear fruit. If the Serampore community fails to nurture and supply young sprouted seedlings for the churches to sow in the field which is the world, then Serampore is failing in its task.

I cannot, of course, regard the Serampore community as the church which does the actual planting. I am not even sure that the Serampore community can decide on its own what kind of seedlings or saplings it would supply to the churches. They can at best engage in a discussion with the churches as to what kind of products they expect. That discussion was started once, but seems to have fallen by the wayside, and the Senate may be making decisions in isolation

from what the churches think they need. The time has come for Serampore to take the initiative for the churches recommencing the discussion among themselves as to what kind of trained people they need.

What I have to say here is not meant as an alternative for the discussion among the churches. I am only expressing a personal view, something I wish for my own seminary as for other colleges. I fully accept the principle that our theological colleges have a double responsibility: first to undertake the formation of good ministerial candidates, and second to enable the ministry of the whole church in the world today. It is with both these tasks in mind that I suggest three central points we need to keep in mind.

I. CHRIST AND SECULAR CULTURE

I remember the furor in the sixties about secularisation and the death of God, and all that. My friends Harvey Cox (The Secular City), Theodor Van Leeuwen (Christianity in World History), Bishop Robinson (Honest to God), Gabe Vahanian, Altizer and a host of others, seemed so glad to announce and celebrate the death of God, the coming of age of secular humanity, and humanity's glorious entering into the patrimony of the dead Father-God. Simple and bewildered people like the present speaker, who could not locate the body of this dead god or pinpoint the time of his death, questioned concepts like the irreversibility of the process of secularisation, and ideologies about the secular culture rather than the church being now the agent of evangelisation.

I remember that even in 1979 Harvard Theological Quarterly could not publish my Dudley Lecture at Harvard where I had argued that secularisation comes in periodic waves and was already receding at that time. I still believe that where religion gets too much political power and inevitably misuses it, secularisation as a process was bound to set in, but that it would recede when the secular way of life proves to be full of its own kind of problems.

Ours is such a time. The secular world view neither makes intellectual sense, nor is it capable of sustaining a viable way of life. Generations may persist in the fond belief that the secular is a rational view; there is however no rational way of showing that the world open to our senses and scientific instruments is the only world that exists.

We live today in a globally expanding western civilisation that was born in the European Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries and its uncritical reliance on critical rationality as the way to all truth.

We hold as a noble principle the "separation" of religion and politics, as if they can in fact be kept in watertight compartments. We fool ourselves by thinking that by legislation we can accomplish that separation. We embrace as lofty principles of democracy the silly and impractical notions of a secular state, secular academy, secular education, secular medicine and secular morality. I do not have the time here to show you by critical rational methods how irrational and inconsistent these ideas are. I will only point out that by these principles and notions we have sought to drive out any reference to the transcendent in our concepts of justice and our constructions of political economy.

We have sought to drive out any reference to the transcendent in our great knowledge-gathering, knowledge-disseminating and knowledge-utilizing operations, i.e. in our science/technology, university, educational and research systems. We have tried to follow a system of medicine and healing independent of all reference to the transcendent, and now our doctors and hospitals cause more disease than they manage to heal. We have long before announcing the death of God, violently entered into our God-given patrimony and madly begun pillaging, plundering, ravaging and fouling the earth and sky. And we suffer—suffer the torments of a love-less hell, an unlivably fouled earth, a culture of persistent militarism, violence, crime and

terrorism, world structures of blatant and largely unquestioned in-justice, exploitation and oppression, a world of war and pestilence, starvation and famine.

Is this the world we bargained for? Is this the world we want now? A major task of the Church at this critical juncture of human history is to make people see how rotten the foundations of our secular civilisation are, and to begin to lay new and more sane foundations for the new civilisation which must soon come if we are not to perish. The question for us today is, Does the Serampore curriculum enable our colleges to reflect on the foundations of our civilisation, in order that our young ministerial candidates can see how wrong the foundational assumptions of our civilisations are? It is no use preaching a simple political morality, or to keep on asking for justice, peace and the integrity of creation within the framework of our present urbantechnological 'smoke-stack civilisation' as Alvin Toffler calls it. Neither political morality nor justice, neither a lasting peace nor a healthy environment, can be established on the existing foundations of our civilisations, built on a secular, non-transcendent, pseudo-rational perception of reality.

A theology of liberation which does not reflect on the foundational assumptions of our life cannot help the church to fulfil its ministry in the bewildered world of today. There is a fundamental conflict between the faith of the Christian Church and the faith of our contemporary culture. Unless we tackle this conflict, any attempt on the part of Christians to domesticate ourselves within this culture could amount to the betrayal of the faith itself.

Such reflection calls for a bringing together of western intellectual experience, our own political experience in the kind of state we have created, the Indian heritage mainly in the Mahabharata and the dharmasastras, and an acute, deep and competent philosophical-theological analysis. We cannot choose between the alternatives of Savarkar's Hindu Nationalist perception of India's future

as envisaged by the BJP, VHP, Shiv Sena and others on one side, and the Nehruvian vision of a democratic socialist future very much shaped by the principles of western liberalism on the other. Nor can we afford to succumb to the Manmohanian version of the New Order in India. Nor we need to abandon totally the Marxist vision, which has been temporarily discredited. We need something that takes the best in these visions and goes deeper into our own heritage of Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism at its best, as well as our heritage from Central and West Asia, and indeed, our Adivasi culture. I cannot go deeper than that in this brief Convocation address, except to say that we must totally abjure the secular world view, and avoid interpreting our heritage in any narrow parochially national terms. Our seminaries and colleges and therefore Serampore, have a responsibility here to give a lead.

II. PERSON AND COMMUNITY AS SEED-BED

But is theology the answer? We preachers and theologians are professional word-spinners and word-mongers. It is difficult for us to grasp the extent to which we have intellectualised and thereby distorted the faith. We think teaching something vaguely and broadly called theology, with so many branches and subjects, is the job of a theological seminary. I think the expressions "theological college" and "theological seminary" should be banished from our vocabulary for they are fundamentally misleading. A college is a place where people live together, and I am not sure how the adjective 'theological' could qualify that community. Neither can I see how a seminary, which means a seed-bed, can be qualified by that adjective.

Unless we are prepared to go back to the original meaning of *theologia*, in the words which the Roman Catholic priest Yves Congar uses (see his article on *Theology* in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*) for describing the Eastern Orthodox understanding of theology: "It is not a simple intellectual exercise but a call to live in a personal way the truth revealed by Jesus Christ and proclaimed in the faith

of the Orthodox Church, which draws its life and inspiration from the Holy Spirit. Theoretical knowledge must be integrated with life experience and with prayer that is practiced as part of the church community and its liturgical celebration."

The Eastern Christian tradition sees theology as a process, a way of life, raising the Christian to the God-given image of man expressed in Christ Incarnate, by the power of the Holy Spirit in the eucharistic-episcopal community of faith. Intellectual reflection plays only an ancillary role in this process. It is the life and experience of the community that is primary. That community has two special marks: living by the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and keeping alive the Apostolic Tradition by the historic and universal episcopate. Where these marks are faint, the Christian ministry in the world is bound to be defective.

What is primary for a proper programme for our seminaries and colleges is not theology as such, but intensified ministerial formation through life in the eucharistic community. A Serampore curriculum makes little sense to me if it simply prescribes courses of academic study and then adds a few "practical" experience programmes. Both theological and other study is indeed necessary, and practical experience is indeed essential. But without putting both in the context of a eucharistic-apostolic worshipping community living in accordance with a discipline, these two can only create a bunch of talkative activists as they are now doing.

Jesus Christ incarnate is not just a topic or a form of words or discourse. He is a living person whose Body is the eucharistic community. The Truth, God in Christ creating and reconciling the universe to Himself, is not a science or ideology. It is a living truth to be personally experienced in the life of the worshipping, loving and serving community. I think it is time that the Senate and Board began some reflections on what this means and implies for our curriculum. I can not say more than that in this brief Convocation address.

III. IDENTIFYING WITH THE WORLD WHICH CHRIST LOVED.

When the eucharistic-episcopal community lives in isolation from the rest of the world, the community soon becomes inauthentic. This is what has already happened to many Eastern Orthodox communities all over the world. Christ loved the world and gave himself for the life of the world. I think it is important to remember that Christ did not die just for Christians, nor even just for all human beings. It is the world that He has redeemed, not just individual men and women. "God so loved the world....." He is the Saviour of the World.

The Orthodox theoretically recognise this in their liturgy, when they say, before communion: "The One Holy Father, Who by His grace, shaped this world, is with us; the One Holy Son, who redeemed it by the precious passions of His body, is with us; with us is the One Living Holy Spirit, the Perfecter and Completer of all that is and is to be." It is the world which God created and which he through the Son and Holy Spirit, redeems and perfects.

It would be a funny situation indeed if Christ loves the world, and His Body, the Church takes an indifferent attitude towards that same world. It is because Christ loved the world and gave himself for it, that I am also concerned for the peace of that world, for justice among the persons and communities of that world, and for a healthy environment for all living beings in that world.

It is this love for the world that should drive us to reflect deeper on what ails the world, on how a new and less dehumanizing civilisation can be generated in that world, how the religions, instead of fighting each other, can cooperate for the welfare of all humanity, on why the civilisation created by the European Enlightenment and spreading all over the world should be called in question and alternatives sought, and so on. The conventional Marxist analysis of what is wrong with the world seems to have been at least temporarily discredited. We need a fresh vision and a fresh pattern for active pioneering.

Unfortunately our secular universities do not help us very much with this task, since the universities are themselves a part of that civilisation. Is the Serampore establishment capable of sufficient detachment from that civilisation to initiate such a process of deep reflection in which our students can take an active part? I leave that question with you.

But reflection is not sufficient by itself. Unless reflection leads to some pioneering in the area of alternate styles or ways of community life, integrating the eucharistic-apostolic with the political-economic, our preaching about civilisation will certainly sound hollow. If theology and ministerial formation does not develop pioneering patterns for human community life, its relevance can only be doubtful. That is a big challenge for Serampore.

TO CONCLUDE

I have simply pointed out three areas in which the Senate of Serampore College ought to be doing some intense and informed reflection: the foundations of modern civilisations and thought and the assumptions of our secular culture; the overintellectualisation of our curriculum; and the need for greater identification with all the struggles and strivings of our world, in a fully eucharistic-apostolic community pioneering in the area of political economy. May the Holy Spirit lead us in that task.

To you, graduating students, let me wish you a fruitful ministry in the vineyard of the Lord, which is the whole world. May the Holy spirit guide you into all wisdom and make you instruments and agents of His work. May Christ's blessing abide upon you all and on Christ's Church as we fulfil Christ's ministry in this world. God bless you, graduating students as you go into that ministry.