

New Humanity at the Encounter of Religions and Secular Ideologies - An Exploration into the Theological Vision of M. M. Thomas

In India there has always been an inner longing for a new humanity devoid of any form of oppression and dehumanization. This longing is all the more evident today, as a number of movements, having perceived the crucial importance and the urgent need for the realization of this longing, have become actively engaged in leading the people towards this end. It is gratifying to note that such movements are often secular in character, and that religious movements too are becoming increasingly involved. This emerging encounter between religions and secular ideologies poses a serious challenge to the Indian Christian theologians involved in articulating and creating an indigenous theology in the contemporary socio-politico-economic context.

It is surely no exaggeration to say that M. M. Thomas is one of the pioneers of the Indian liberation theology and a substantial contributor to this encounter. It is his conviction that the socio-political and religious upheavals that have been taking place since Hindu renaissance and India's freedom struggle can provide a context for interpreting the Christian faith, by which a relevant indigenous theology could be developed. In this article an attempt is made to delve into his idea of New humanity evolving out of the encounter between religions and secular ideologies.

Main Theological Orientation of M. M. Thomas : A Short Sketch

A careful study of the writings of M. M. Thomas will reveal that he has employed a particular theological app-

roach towards the formation of Indian Christian theology. According to him, a *living* theology, which by itself indicates a certain dynamic quality, is always situational or contextual - that is, it must bring the fact of the historical Christ to bear on the contemporary situation. Today there is a general agreement in theological circles that the Gospel of Jesus Christ transcends all cultures, ideologies and religions. More importantly, there is also a conviction that the universality of the Gospel should find its expression in its ability to penetrate different cultures, ideologies and religions in order to transform them from within.¹ Hence, the content of a living theology is the discernment of what God-in-Christ is doing in the situation and the interpretation of the truth and meaning of Jesus Christ in terms of the situation and its self-understanding.²

Secondly, in the view of M. M. Thomas, theology cannot be worked out in an ivory-tower isolation. It is dialogical by character. It must take into consideration the different realities of the world in the process of its communication. It is precisely this concern for dialogical communication that persuades him to penetrate deeply into the Indian context of religious renaissance and ideological conflicts. Indian theology, as he visualizes it, can come into being only as a result of a living and ongoing dialogue between religions and secular ideologies.

Furthermore, a growing consciousness of pluralism has brought together various religions and secular movements, "into a community of common concern and responsibility to build societies which realize the highest possible

1. M. M. Thomas, "Some Trends in Contemporary Indian Christian Theology," *Religion and Society*, 24 (1977), p. 4; also cfr. J. T. Crozier, "M. M. Thomas," *Church and Community*, 19 (1962), p. 1.
2. M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p. 308.

quality of human life."³ M. M. Thomas envisages the problems of human existence in the modern world as providing a common ground for such a dialogue. To be more specific, in the given Indian context of poverty and oppression, humanization is an important area of dialogue with Hinduism. In this regard, he points out two fundamental concerns of neo-Hinduism, namely, the moral regeneration of Indian society advocated by Rammohun Roy and Mahatma Gandhi, and the ultimate spiritual liberation through the philosophical vision advocated by Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan. From different angles, both are wrestling with the relationship between the ultimate spiritual destiny of humanity and the regeneration of society. He writes :

Some of the fundamentals of Christian theology are to be thought afresh in the light of their relevance to the issues which contemporary Hindu theology is facing. In doing so, the common Christian and Hindu concern for a spiritual basis for true humanization is the most fruitful frame of reference which can illumine the theological dialogue at depth between Hinduism and Christianity.⁴

Needless to say, the concern for humanization brings Christians into dialogue with Marxism and other secular philosophies. Longing for social justice and fighting against all the dehumanizing forces of modern society should be jointly shared by them.

Thirdly, another point which deserves closer attention is his preference for theological anthropology as a framework for developing a living theology for India. Today a growing number of theologians, in their efforts towards con-

3. M. M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1975), p. xiii.

4. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization*, (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1971), p. 26.

structuring contextualized theologies, try to pay much attention to the study of various elements that shape human beings and the society in which they live and grow in relationship with one another. They perceive, understand and re-appropriate the essence of the Christian faith from the perspective of culture, way of life, inter-human relationships etc.⁵ Thus, a new hermeneutical approach of proceeding from the anthropological and the cultural to the theological has come into practice. Being convinced of this evolving approach, M. M. Thomas proposes his basic theological framework as follows :

Every theology has an anthropological content inherent in it or derivable from it; and every anthropology is based on theological presuppositions either explicitly or implicitly. By theology I mean the intellectual articulation of man's faith in God or in a structure of meaning and sacredness which is seen as his ultimate destiny. And by anthropology I mean, in its broad sense, the understanding of the nature of man and his relation to nature, social culture and history.⁶

He has developed this theological framework, namely theological anthropology, in order to explore the context in which the Gospel of Christ is to be communicated. For context is extremely important for any communication or interpretation. He finds *the urge for humanization* and the spiritual quest underlying it, discernible in both religious and secular movements and faiths. Precisely proceeding from this human quest, he is attempting to construct an indigenous theology for India.

5. Cfr. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York : Orbis Books, 1985); Felix Wilfred, "Local Church : Practices and Theologies," *Sedos Bulletin*, 22 (1990), pp. 87-103.
6. M. M. Thomas, *Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (Bangalore : CISRS, 1976), p. 193.

New Humanity in the Vision of M. M. Thomas

Against the background of M. M. Thomas' fundamental theological orientation, let us enter into the vision of new humanity, one of his principal theological concerns. To the question, what is the innermost longing of modern man, he would emphatically answer, "growing into fuller humanity."⁷ Since World War II tremendous changes have been taking place in the socio-cultural setting of the whole of Asia and particularly of India. M. M. Thomas perceives that an Asian revolution is gradually taking place at a crucial moment in secular history when the entire humanity is marching towards the third millennium. As he writes,

Behind the many revolutions taking place in Asia today, whether at the political, economic, social or cultural level, men are seeking a fuller and richer human life.⁸

What is this Asian revolution? An undue ritualistic pietism with a firm adherence to dehumanizing traditions is, day by day, losing ground and a new communitarian vision with a particular accent on human dignity is gaining momentum in every sphere of human life. In every nook and corner of Asia do we find an overwhelming outburst of people's inmost yearning for identity and affirmation. In other words, people are awakened, more than ever before, to a greater humanity marked by human dignity, interpersonal relationships and a spiritual vision of a more abundant life. M. M. Thomas repeatedly affirms in his writings that it is precisely

7. M. M. Thomas, "Significance of the Ecumenical Study on the Humanum for the Church in India," *Church Weekly*, 25 (1971), p. 12.
8. "Secular Man and Christian Mission," (A dialogue between Hendrikus Berkhof and M. M. Thomas) *Religion and Society*, 15 (1968), p. 14.

for this motive of becoming a true human community that man and woman have been created. He notes :

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26, 27). In secular language it is an affirmation that man is a spiritual person called to fulfill himself by establishing mastery over nature and by entering into dialogue and communion with other persons in society.⁹

According to M. M. Thomas, this Asian struggle for fuller humanity is an outcome of the spiritual awakening of the people. In his study of the Asian reality, he particularly pinpoints three movements which have contributed largely towards achieving the present break-through :

First : the renewal of the old religions and cultures; second : the movement of secular humanism; and third : Christianity with its mission of liberation.

Through these emerging revolutionary changes, as envisaged by M. M. Thomas, God creates the conditions for a greater humanity; he prepares the Asian people for the challenge to decide for or against Christ; he tests the Churches in Asia and calls them to genuine repentance and total renewal.¹⁰

In the vision of M. M. Thomas, working towards a new humanity cuts across religious and secular ideologies and, moreover, must become the predominant concern of both ¹¹ Particularly speaking, it is equally a religious one,

9. M. M. Thomas, *Secular Ideologies and the Secular Meaning of Christ* op. cit., p. 195.
10. Cfr. M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London : SCM Press, 1966), pp. 29-34.
11. M. M. Thomas, "The Gospel and the Quest of Modern Asia," *Union Seminary Bulletin* 22 (1967), p. 232.

owing to the growing conviction that religions have to deal with the totality of human being without room for any compartmentalization. Leaving aside all other elements which bring a number of divisions among religions and secular faiths, M. M. Thomas holds that a fruitful dialogue between them can best take place at the point,

where they are grappling with the spiritual understanding of modern man, and the problems of true self-recognition or fulfilment of true humanity within modern existence.¹²

New Humanity and the Centrality of Jesus Christ

Any casual reader of M. M. Thomas will immediately recognize the fact that Jesus Christ is the pull-factor around whom his indigenous theology rotates. It may not be an exaggeration to say that his whole theological edifice is built upon the firm foundation of Christ-centeredness. In the efforts of different religions and secular ideologies to build up a new humanity, he tries to present Jesus Christ as the central and focal point. Jesus stands at the centre of humanity and through his divine humanity he fulfils the inward desire of human beings to become a new humanity. In this regard, the whole theological vision of M. M. Thomas can be summarized as follows :

1. the Christ-event is the core of the Christian Gospel;
2. It brings divine forgiveness as well as judgement on every human person in the world;
3. More importantly, it remains the central event in the secular history unifying the entire humanity.

12. M. M. Thomas, *"Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism"* (Madras : Christian Literature Society, 1978), pp. 103-104.

Our principal concern is the third one: How can Jesus Christ be the unifying factor of entire humanity? In what way can Christ and his Gospel comply with the longing of the people? These are the pertinent questions raised at once by any reasonable person. M. M. Thomas is exactly concerned with the same questions. He asks in his own way:

Are we theologically right in seeking a Christian interpretation of the Asian revolution in the purpose of God as revealed in Jesus Christ? What are the creaturely purposes to which God has awakened the Asian people through the Asian revolution? .. How is the Gospel of Jesus Christ a redemption for them?¹³

In his enquiry he finds that the Asian revolution is raising the most fundamental spiritual questions about God, humanity and the world, questions for which Jesus Christ is uniquely relevant. His message of the Kingdom of God and its realization through his death and resurrection can enable the people to found a new humanity as it offers them a new life and thus makes them a new creation. In his words:

We emphasize today... a common humanity given through Christ in creation and renewed by him in redemption, and the spiritual awakening of men to an awareness of self-transcendence in their being human.¹⁴

It is in this sense that the quest of modern Asia for a fuller human life may itself be seen as a ferment which makes Christ and his Gospel challengingly relevant.

It is understandable, when Christians are exhorted to make a choice for Christ. But, how can we expect the

13. M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 20.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 95.

people belonging to other religions to decide for him? To answer the question, M. M. Thomas has recourse to Paul Devanandan's¹⁵ theology of inter-faith fellowship. According to Devanandan, the cross of Christ and the forgiving love it has mediated destroyed the enmity between Jews and gentiles by abolishing the law, which had separated them, creating in his person *one new humanity in the place of the two*. The Christ-event has created, "a new *koinonia* transcending the division between Christians and adherents of other religions and no religion."¹⁶ Following the same theological insight, M. M. Thomas writes :

Christ is breaking down the wall of partition between Christians and non-Christians, as he did once the partition wall between Jews and gentiles.¹⁷

In this context, he raises another crucial question, "Can men of other religions respond to a vision of Christ in faith through their own (i. e., indigenous) religious symbolisms? Does Christ transcend religions?"¹⁸

M. M. Thomas' answer is of the utmost importance in the understanding of his idea of Christ's uniqueness in the

5. Paul Devanandan (1901-1962) was the Founder-Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (CISRS), Bangalore. Under him M. M. Thomas served as Associate-Director for some years. The contribution of Devanandan to the Hindu-Christian dialogue is unique. His books include *The Concept of Maya* (London, 1950), *Christian Concern in Hinduism* (Bangalore), 1961, and a number of monographs on various subjects, especially on different facets of Neo-Hinduism.
16. Paul Devanandan, *I will lift my eyes to the Hills* (Bangalore: CISRS, 1962), p. 126.
17. M. M. Thomas, "Christ-centred Syncretism," *Religion and Society* 30 (1983), p. 31.
18. M. M. Thomas, *New Creation in Christ* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1976), p. 28.

context of other religions. First, he makes a distinction between Christ and Christianity, and places him above all the religions including Christianity. In the previous years clouds of misunderstanding had hung over the inter-religious interaction in India, since Christianity was set above other religions either by condemning them as false or devilish, or by acknowledging that their religious aspirations can find fulfilment only in Christianity. But a distinction is made by M. M. Thomas to indicate that the unique character of Christ is not attributed to the religion founded by him. Christ remains transcending Christianity as a religion. He stated it in the following way :

Christ transcends Christianity, non-Christian religions and secularism, and judges and redeems their adherents if they are open to him with their own religious or non-religious setting.¹⁹

The proposal of M. M. Thomas is that Christianity must be distinguished from Christ who is alone the universal saviour of all. This will lead to a theology of religions where Christ is seen as "transcending all religions, and calling for the transformation of all religions, and the conversion of men and women in integral relation with their religions to Jesus as the Christ of God."²⁰

If faith in Christ transcends Christian religion, according to M. M. Thomas, this leads to an inescapable implication. That is to say, it is possible to hold faith in Christ within the framework of other religions and secular ideologies. Therefore, in his opinion, it was possible for unbap-

19. Ibid., p. 29.

20. Ibid., p. 66.

nized individuals like Kandaswamy Chetty of Tamilnadu²¹ and baptized individuals like Manilal Parekh of Maharashtra²² who stayed within the Hindu religious tradition, to claim to have faith in Christ. Similarly, *The Church of the New Dispensation* of Keshub Chunder Sen²³ and P. C. Mazoomdar in Bengal,²⁴ the movement around Subba Rao²⁵

21. Kandaswamy Chetty was a Professor of Madras Christian College, who considered himself an unbaptized Christian. In 1933 he formed the *Fellowship of the followers of Jesus*, the object of which was to bring together Hindu believers in Christ. He devoted his life to preaching the Gospel of Christ. Cfr. Kaj Baggo, *The Movement Around Subba Rao* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1968), p. 2.
22. Manilal Parekh was a member of the Brahmo Samaj. Through the Samaj he came nearer to Christ and was baptized, though he did not attach himself to any particular Church.
23. Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884) belonged to one of the prominent families of Calcutta. At the age of 22 he joined the Brahmo Samaj and soon became its leader. After leaving college, following the family tradition, he was employed in the Bank of Bengal. After two years he gave up his job and became a full time missionary of the Brahmo Samaj, living a life of utter dependence on God. After a breach in the original Brahmo Samaj he and his followers founded the Brahmo Samaj of India in 1885, introducing elements from many religions to form an eclectic church. He was brought prominently before the European community by his lecture on (Jesus Christ, Europe and Asia). He developed the idea of the (New Dispensation of the Spirit) and sought to build the Church of the New Dispensation round his own inspiration.
24. P. C. Mazoomdar was a loyal follower of Keshub Chunder Sen and succeeded him in the leadership of the Brahmo Samaj. His best known books are *The Life and Teaching of Keshub Chunder Sen* (1887) and *The Oriental Christ* (1883).
25. Subba Rao was born in Eluru in Andhra Pradesh. The origin of the movement goes back to the vision he had in 1942. It completely changed his life. He had a conviction that the Christian Churches had nothing to do with Christ. His movement had no organization, but a number of people became devotees of Christ, through him. Cfr. Kaj Baago, *The Movement Around Subba Rao* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1963).

in Andhra Pradesh and other Hindu religious movements could claim to commit themselves to the ultimacy of Jesus Christ for growing in their spiritual life. To corroborate further he brings the example of Mahatma Gandhi who once said, speaking of Jesus Christ :

The lives of all have, in some greater degree, been changed by his presence, his actions and the word spoken by his divine voice... And because the life of Jesus has had the significance and the transcendence to which I have alluded, I believe that he belongs not solely to Christianity but to the entire world, to all races and people.²⁶

If religions and secular ideologies can contribute towards the realization of new humanity already in this world through their promotion of humanization, they need the judgement and redemption of Christ, "who is the source and foundation of true humanization"²⁷ M. M. Thomas reiterates often this point in his writings.

Let us take first the secular ideologies. The critical analysis of various ideologies at work in society obliged him to conclude that human values and ideologies are not only imperfect but also perverted by human pride and selfishness. They are always prone to deviating from the original motive for which they were developed. For instance, even though Marxism has contributed more than any other ideology to contemporary struggles for justice, we must be aware of the possibility that a Marxist fundamentalism could betray the

26. Quoted by M.M. Thomas in his article, "A Christ-Centred Humanist Approach to other Religions in the Indian Pluralistic Context," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered* ed. by Gavin D' Costa, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, (1990), p. 57; originally published in: M. K. Gandhi, *Modern Review*, October, 1941.

27. M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanization* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1972), p. 10.

very cause of the liberation of the oppressed. In many former communist countries, basic democratic values were suppressed in many ways through the monopolizing of power by one party. For this reason every ideology and social program needs to be purified and redeemed again and again, lest it betray the struggles of the oppressed for liberation. It is the conviction of M. M. Thomas that only the Gospel of Christ has the power to redeem ideologies and politics from extreme perversions and can make them serve the goal of humanization. He expresses this conviction when he says :

The Christian task is not to fight against humanist ideologies and movements, but to present the faith, as the power which can redeem them from their most terrible perversions and reestablish them in such a way, that they do not betray, but realize their true ends.²⁸

If the Kingdom of God is the goal of human history, and if we believe that secular ideologies can also contribute towards the realization of it already in this world through their promotion of humanization, it becomes evident that they too need the judgement and redemption of Christ.

Secondly, the same concern of humanization, as has already been indicated, provides the most relevant context for dialogue among different religions. The serious account of human reality taken by the Hindu renaissance movement in its concern to build up modern India makes inter-religious collaboration more and more appropriate. For, the cultural awakening in India and its underlying current of humanism, has the ferment of the Gospel at its core. What should be aimed at, at this juncture, is a further transformation of

28. M. M. Thomas, "Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility," (unpublished manuscript) (Bangalore : Union Theological College Archives, 1971), pp. 80-81.

• their humanism and theology in the light of God's purpose for man as revealed in the divine humanity of Jesus Christ."²⁹ It is in this context that the proclamation of the Christian *kerygma* of the person of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation and the redeeming act of God in human history, gets its challenging relevance. For, "Jesus Christ and the New Humanity offered in him are...the spiritual foundation, the source of judgement, renewal and ultimate fulfilment of the struggles of mankind today for its humanity."³⁰ Hence M. M. Thomas argues that the centrality of the historical person of Jesus Christ is most relevant for this proclamation, even if it appears to be most scandalous to Hindu partners. Without any hesitation, he declares :

The aspect of the Gospel which both the traditional and the new Hinduism consider to be scandalous in the Christian faith is that (God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself) - that the life, death on the cross and the resurrection of a particular person in history is the unique act of God by which He has brought salvation to the whole world. *I submit that this is precisely the element which is going to help Hinduism in its inner theological struggle to affirm the eternal significance of man's historical destiny and provide a spiritual basis for the newly emerging human values.*³¹

He argues further that Hinduism has already acknowledged Christ in its renescent efforts. His book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* speaks of it in an elaborate manner. In general, all religions have received the impact

29. M. M. Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecu-
menism* op. cit., p. 139.

30. M. M. Thomas *Salvation and Humanization* op. cit., p. 4.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 26 (emphasis mine).

of Christ, and have transformed themselves at least in partial acknowledgement of him. In his words :

All religions have received the impact of the Person and Principles of Jesus the Eternal Word made flesh, and have transformed themselves, partly in defending themselves against him and partly in acknowledgement of him. This is the substance of the renaissance and resurgence of other religions.³²

Wider Ecumenism or Wider Koinonia as a Project for Building up a New Humanity

The common effort for the building up of a new humanity and the search for its spiritual foundations within the context of dialogue among religions and secular movements provides the occasion for Christianity of the communication of Jesus Christ as the one who has the power to redeem humanity from its perversions. Hence he holds :

it is within such co-existence and co-operation that we can best enter into dialogue at the deepest on the nature and destiny of man, and on the nature of ultimate Truth and proclaim the judgement and salvation of Christ himself. Men, whether secular or religious, are asking questions today to which the Gospel is challengingly relevant.³³

Only in this context can the Church in India best articulate the purpose of God for the world as revealed in Jesus Christ. The Kingdom of God would flourish upon the earth in concrete measure only by creating a new humanity in Christ. That is why M. M. Thomas visualizes a wider com-

32. M. M. Thomas, "The Post-Colonial Crisis in Mission: A Comment," *Religion and Society*, 18 (1971), p. 67.

33. M. M. Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism* op. cit., p. 103.

munity or wider ecumenism in the world going beyond the narrow limits of the Church. He writes :

"No doubt, *koinonia* in the New Testament is the new humanity created by God in Christ and is confined to the Church. But it is the Church which has to discern and acknowledge this new humanity in Christ in the world."³⁴

As this new humanity in Christ transcends Christianity, other religions, and secular ideologies, M. M. Thomas proposes accordingly a new vision of *koinonia* at three levels.³⁵

First, the *koinonia* of the Eucharistic community of the Church - a unity of diverse persons acknowledging *the person of Jesus Christ as Messiah*.

Second, a larger *koinonia* of dialogue among people of different faiths inwardly being renewed by their acknowledgement of *the ultimacy of the pattern of suffering servanthood as exemplified by the crucified Jesus Christ*.

Third, a still larger *koinonia* of those involved in the power and political struggle for new societies and a world community based on secular or religious anthropologies *informed by the agape of the cross*. According to him, the spiritual tension between religions and secular movements seems to be essential for the development of a Christology more relevant to our pluralistic age.

At this juncture, it must be pointed out that any engagement to build up a new humanity should proceed from deep

34. M. M. Thomas, "Significance of the Ecumenical Study on the Humanum for the Church in India," *Church Weekly* 25 (1971), p. 11.

35. M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (Geneva: WCC, 1987), p. 119.

spiritual experience and constant conversion of heart without which collaboration between religious and secular movements would not be much effective. In general M. M. Thomas speaks of two types of conversion in every person's life, which he himself experienced in his own life. They are: *the conversion from self to God and the conversion from God to the world.* Explaining this, he notes,

"the first one appropriates divine forgiveness and finds a standing ground for oneself before God; the second one moves to combat the evils of the world around in the power of God."³⁶

Applying this to Christians, he indicates, that the first conversion, namely accepting Jesus Christ as the personal Saviour and God, should lead every Christian to the second one, namely, fighting against the enslaving powers of the world and working for a new humanity in Christ in collaboration with other religions and secular ideologies.

Conclusion

It is to be acknowledged that M. M. Thomas has made a creative and marvellous contribution by initiating a new approach of contextualization in the ongoing process of theologizing in India. The urgency and the importance of the meeting of religions and secular ideologies towards building up a new humanity in the given context of religious and ideological pluralism is being realized more and more today. A relentless quest, as a result, is found among Indian theologians, to arrive at an indigenous theology of liberation with a clear vision of building up a new humanity of love, justice and equality. In this regard, they perceive not only the relevance of the Gospel message, but also the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in a country where staggering millions of people are drenched in abject poverty. We can say that

36. M. M. Thomas, "A Spirituality for Combat," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 5 (1984), p. 144.

the theological concern of M. M. Thomas can be visualized as an outward expression of the emerging global and collective concern of every Indian theologian today.

The ecclesial implication of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is reflected in M. M. Thomas' vision of Christ-centred fellowship in a pluralistic situation. As seen earlier, he speaks of *koinonia-in-Christ* at three different levels. Every level is inclusive and open, being, at the same time, centred on Christ. In the same manner, Felix Wilfred also observes that the fluidity and inclusiveness which Christ espoused during his life time, well corresponds to this way of understanding community at different levels.³⁷

The point which needs our special attention is M. M. Thomas' theological proposal of *koinonia-in Christ* being built among other religions and secular ideologies. No doubt, Jesus Christ has been really an inspiring force for a number of Hindus and for many action group members. His own book *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* is itself a clear example bearing witness to this fact. A pilot study, conducted on a random selection basis in Chennai in 1976 by Dr. Davic and his team from the Gurukul Theological College, reveals the fact that 10 percent of Hindus have openly acknowledged Christ as the unique saviour and at the same time have regretted their inability to cut away from their community by reception of baptism.³⁸ The vision of M. M. Thomas offers a possibility for such people to grow in a new fellowship in the name of Jesus Christ who is dear to their heart.

We cannot but admire M. M. Thomas for his commitment to the gospel message and his openness to the other

37. Felix Wilfred, "Local Church : Practices and Theologies, Reflections from Asia," *Sedos Bulletin*, 22 (1990), p. 99.

38. Cfr. Albert Nambiaparambil, "Religions in Dialogue : Indian Experience Today," in *Meeting of Religions*, ed. by Thomas Aykara (Bangalore : Dharmaram Publications, 1978), p. 85.

religions and secular ideologies in his theological approach. Can we expect, at the same time, Hindus and other religious people to accept the *koinonia* in the name of Christ, leaving aside their own religious figures? Will it not be an imposition of our faith affirmation on them? The Christ-centred fellowship, therefore, can be better perceived, if it is placed against the global perspective of the Reign of God. After all, Christ cannot be separated from the fundamental message and principal deeds of his life, which are intrinsically linked with the Reign of God. The Reign of God brings all people together from east and west, north and south with no barriers and limits (Lk 13:29). The same can also be at the heart of each level of *koinonia*, just as the Church is specifically called upon to be the sign and sacrament of the Reign of God during her pilgrimage on earth (LG 5).

Dr. S. Devaraj