

## **Dr. M.M. Thomas' Theology of Prophetic Participation in Salvation and the Struggle for Humanisation**

*Presentation at the seminar of the Birth Centenary Celebration of M.M.Thomas in Tiruvalla, 31 August 2015 by Rev.Dr Hielke Wolters, Associate General Secretary of the World Council of Churches*

### ***Introductory remarks***

It is a great honour for me to be invited by His Grace the Most Rev.Dr Joseph Mar Thoma Metropolitan to give an address about the work of Dr M.M. Thomas. My own theological journey started with my study in the Netherlands and in Bangalore at the United Theological College. My stay in Bangalore brought me in contact with M.M.Thomas and encouraged me to study his theological thinking. In those days, we very much focussed on what was called 'doing theology' as we felt that academic theology can only be relevant if it is rooted in the day to day struggle of people for their basic needs. To me Thomas' theological journey seemed to be an excellent example of 'doing theology' as he did not began his reflections in an academic setting, but through his involvement with social concerns.

My study of his thinking was therefore inspired by an eagerness to know from where he got his ideas and theological insights: from being involved of the people's struggle for fuller humanity or from studying theological books. Fortunately, Thomas had the good habit to archive almost every piece of writing, from very small notes to extensive papers and articles. So I started off to read all these documents as witnesses of his theological journey. It was a blessing to visit him several times here in Tiruvalla. In the mornings we reflected on his thinking in the various stages in his life, in the afternoon we played chess and in the evenings we had a walk meeting several of his friends. This personal encounter with Thomas has very much shaped my own theological reflection. I am extremely grateful for his guidance, his humour and his patience with me.

To reflect on Thomas' thinking during this Birth Centenary Celebrations has placed me before a dilemma. Thomas' theological reflections have a profound contextual nature. He developed his thinking in response to developments in the society, the churches, the ecumenical movement. He tried to discern insights which might help us further in understanding our Christian responsibility. His theology is by nature a dialogical theology, developed in the conversation with people of his time. So, if we want to honour Thomas we need to do that by inviting him to participate in our current theological debates. It is for this reason that I want to ask him: Dr Thomas, what is your idea about this new proposal from the World Council of Churches Assembly in Busan that the churches should join in a *Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace*? After all, you have been moderator of the WCC's central committee. What would you have said as moderator when people would have come to you with this new initiative? What would have been your theological response?

In my presentation this morning, I propose to open the conversation with Thomas by first reviewing his own ecumenical journey of 'understanding and responsibility' as he called it in his unpublished autobiography.<sup>1</sup> How did he develop an effective balance between, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup>M.M.Thomas, 'Faith Seeking Understanding and Responsibility'. Unpublished manuscript. Archives of the United Theological College in Bangalore.

participation in the nation building processes and prophetic witness against social, economic and political injustice in India? How did he sharpen his understanding of justice and peace while reflecting on the theological concept of divine grace? What was his contribution to the ecumenical debates of his days on the relation between salvation and humanisation? Is his work on spirituality, spirituality for combat, still relevant for our search for pilgrimage spirituality? I am sure that he would have loved to participate in the ecumenical debate on a pilgrimage of justice and peace, and that his contribution would have been challenging, 'challenging relevant', to use a phrase of A.G. Hogg (1875-1954), frequently cited by Thomas.

However, before we go deeper into Thomas' reflections I need to say a few words about the WCC's initiative to launch a Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace.

### ***The call to move together***

It was the 10<sup>th</sup> assembly of the World Council of Churches, held from 30 October to 8 November 2013 in Busan, Republic of Korea, that called for a pilgrimage of justice and peace. The assembly message says: "We intend to move together. Challenged by our experiences in Busan, we challenge all people of good will to engage their God-given gifts in transforming actions. This assembly calls you to join us in pilgrimage."<sup>2</sup> A number of aspects are interesting in this call to join a pilgrimage. Why did the WCC call for a pilgrimage?

Mobilizing the churches and ecumenical movement around a thematic decade has a long tradition. The last thematic decade, the Decade to Overcome Violence (2001 - 2010), concluded with an impressive International Ecumenical Peace Convocation in Kingston, Jamaica, 17-22 May 2011. The possibility of a next thematic decade was already discussed while reflecting on the results of the Decade to Overcome Violence. There was still enough work to be done around *Just Peace* with the on-going economic and ecological problems. Also newly emerging concerns, for instance around religion and violence, made clear that the peace-agenda was not completed. Yet, the general feeling was that a joint ecumenical action and reflection process should not be shaped again in the form of a decade.

The leadership of the WCC had at least three reasons to move from the concept of a decade towards a more ecclesial metaphor. Firstly, the WCC felt that the added value of an ecumenical body in the public debate is not only to advocate for political solutions, how important they may be. The unique contribution of ecumenical advocacy work is that it can mobilise churches through addressing spiritual and theological dimensions of a problem. At the same time the theological approach helps to deepen the political debates by addressing social, cultural and religious root causes. Secondly, a new metaphor was needed to highlight a new methodological approach. Earlier ecumenical debates have shown a regular tendency of self-confidence: we know what needs to be changed in this world; we have an alternative. In recent years, this attitude has slowly moved towards a more modest self-understanding: would it be possible that we develop a relevant contribution to the public debates knowing that the search for alternatives is complex and needs the wisdom of all. Thirdly, the terminology of a decade was felt to be problematic from a planning perspective. The WCC has every seven or eight years an assembly.

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<sup>2</sup>Erlinda N. Senturias and Theodore A. Gill, Jr. (Eds.), *Encountering the God of Life. Report of the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2014, p.36.

To have planning cycles of 10 year questions the role of assemblies in the process of setting the agenda and evaluating the results.

These theological, methodological and practical considerations have helped to understand that in the ecumenical movement the metaphor of a pilgrimage is more appropriate than the concept of a thematic decade. This change in understanding our ecumenical calling today can already be found in the wording of the Assembly message. It says: "We intend to move together." Moving together is at the very heart of a pilgrimage. However, the words 'we intend to move together' is also an implicit reference to the Message of the First Assembly of the WCC, Amsterdam, 1948, which said: "We intend to stay together." The major achievement of the 1<sup>st</sup> assembly was that churches were able to establish a Council in spite of the severe political and ecclesial divisive forces of those days. The reference in Busan to Amsterdam was based on an assessment of the needs of the day. Unity among churches cannot be limited to mutual recognition of important ecclesial aspects, such as baptism, eucharist and ministry. It also needs to empower churches to work together ecumenically. Unity finds its expression in mission. This does not mean that Busan wants to replace the unity affirmed in theological and ecclesiological agreements by practical unity in the form of ecumenical cooperation. Busan rather highlighted the need for a more holistic understanding of unity.

The quest for an integrated understanding of unity and mission was clearly expressed in the Unity Statement of the 10<sup>th</sup> assembly. This Statement tries to articulate the unity agenda for the coming years in the light of current developments in the world, in churches and in the ecumenical movement. It says: "The unity of the Church, the unity of the human community and the unity of the whole creation are interconnected. Christ who makes us one calls us to live in justice and peace and impels us to work together for justice and peace in God's world."<sup>3</sup> The three layers in the search for unity - church, human community and the whole creation - need to strengthen one another. Although this holistic understanding is not entirely new in the ecumenical movement, it helps to provide for a sound theological understanding of the pilgrimage.

Now we have embarked on this pilgrimage, further theological and ecclesiological reflection is urgently needed. The metaphor of a pilgrimage is rather new in the ecumenical movement and needs to be developed further as an inspiring concept that can motivate churches and ecumenical bodies to move together. Similarly, the understanding of justice and peace needs further reflection to avoid that secular concepts are copied into ecumenical language and approaches without critical assessment.

One way of encouraging theological and ecclesiological reflection on the pilgrimage of justice and peace is to open the conversation with the fathers and mothers of the ecumenical movement. Can their experience and insights help us attain a deeper understanding of our current journey? What would M.M.Thomas have said about this proposal to begin an ecumenical movement as a pilgrimage of justice and peace?

To know his answer we cannot only refer to his major publications, but we need to understand his own faith journey. After all we are talking about his response to the idea of a pilgrimage, a

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<sup>3</sup>*Encountering the God of Life. Report of the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches.* p.40, par.13.

journey through which we try to discern what the Holy Spirit wants us to tell about Christian responsibility for promoting justice and peace. What can we learn from Thomas' own faith journey?

### ***Towards a theology of prophetic participation***

Interestingly Thomas' theological journey he did not start with a formal theological education. He graduated in chemistry and started his career as a teacher at the Perumpavoor Asram High School (1935-1937). During his years as student and later at the High School he got in touch with the SCM and the Mar Thoma Youth Union. Being eager to learn more about Christian faith, he started reading books, whatever was available to him. He began with books which strengthened his spiritual life, from authors like Thomas à Kempis, Weatherhead, Baron von Hügel, William Temple, Canon Streeter, A.E. Carvie, W.R. Malthey. Through the SCM he also got to know scholars like Reinhold Niebuhr, Nicolas Berdyaev, John Macmurray, V.A. Demant and Hendrik Kraemer. These thinkers helped him to understand the wider perspective of Christian faith.

In 1984 in a meditation at the Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was visiting professor at that time, he referred to a saying of Hendrik Kraemer that every person needs to go through two conversions: the first conversion from self to God and the second from God to the world.<sup>4</sup> Thomas' spiritual and theological formation very much followed that pattern. First, he deepened his personal, pietistic faith through reading spiritual literature; later his engagement in society was theologically undergirded by reading scholarly articles and books about Christian responsibility in social, economic and political developments.

Thomas later explained that this way of doing theology through practical engagement in the day-to-day reality of the people needs to be at the heart of every theological methodology. In the Introduction to his *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, he explained that "we have to move between looking at religion as a function of society and looking at society as a function of religious truth, of man's search for and faith-response to God, that is, between sociology of religion and theology of society".<sup>5</sup> His own theological journey is an example of this interaction between analysis of developments in society and theological reflection on the meaning of Christian faith. Through my research, I discovered that his thinking went through a number of stages before he arrived at the theological approach as known in his later books, such as *Salvation and Humanisation*.<sup>6</sup>

In his early years, Thomas' theological thinking was very much influenced by what he himself called an 'evangelical and sacramental piety'. In the late 1930s he developed a wider perspective through his work with street boys in Trivandrum and his reflection on social concerns. Later he testified that this practical engagement with young people had helped him tremendously to understand the meaning of genuine love and human personality, concepts that are central in his later writings. His pietistic faith and social involvement got increasingly integrated through his reflections on the meaning of the cross. He later published his meditations and prayers of those days in a booklet with the telling title *The Realization of the Cross* (1972). Focus on God's self-

<sup>4</sup>M.M.Thomas, 'A Spirituality for Combat', in *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1984, p.144

<sup>5</sup>M.M.Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*. Madras: CLS, 1975, p. xi.

<sup>6</sup>Hielke T. Wolters, *Theology of Prophetic Participation. M.M. Thomas' Concept of Salvation and the Collective Struggle for Fuller Humanity in India*. Delhi/Bangalore: ISPCK/UTC, 1996, pp.12-74.

emptying love as the core of Christian faith brought him closer to Gandhi's philosophy and political ideology of non-violence. In his article 'Gandhism and the principles of Jesus', he used A.G.Hogg's description of Jesus as the 'transcendent *satyagrahi*'.<sup>7</sup> Faith in God's self-giving love, revealed through the cross of Christ, finds expression in a non-violent struggle of the people for freedom and justice.

In the 1940s, Thomas became more critical of this approach. He discovered, with so many others in those days, that the concepts of love and non-violence are not strong enough to fight social, economic and political injustice. One of his most impressive articles of those days is the one published in a 'Famine Special' of *Arunodayam* (November 1941) with the title 'Where is God? (Ps 73)'. Where is God in the coastal regions around Shertallay where people die of hunger and thirst due to the war in Europe? He reflected: "Mankind is one brotherhood – if man will not learn it through love, he shall be taught it through judgement. What man refuses to take to heart in a kiss, he shall realise in a catastrophe."<sup>8</sup> Here we see that Thomas became more critical to his earlier trust in the power love and non-violence. In the early 1940s he came closer to Marxist thinking, having doubts about the effectiveness of Gandhi. His theological reflection was more and more influenced by people like Nicolas Berdyaev and Reinhold Niebuhr. He felt the need for a more realistic theological-ideological response to what he saw as a crisis in modern civilization leading to dehumanisation and the disintegration of the human person as well as the community.

This critical analysis of the developments in society helped him also to revisit his theological understanding. At a SCM Leaders' Training Course in 1943, he presented a paper which he later gave the title 'From Utopianism to Tragic Realism'. In this paper he concluded: "The liberal understanding is only a conflict between *human* righteousness and *human* unrighteousness; but the Christian understands that the basic conflict is between *human* righteousness and *divine* righteousness, or to put it differently, between human righteousness turned to proud or *self*-righteousness and divine righteousness. Hence it is that history must be understood as the story of man's sin and God's judgment."<sup>9</sup> This is quite a different theological interpretation of the developments in society than he had in the 1930s. The tragedy of famine and war and the influence of Marxist thinking in Kerala, helped him to see the dark side of humanity. He articulated the crisis in modern civilization and of the modern human person in terms of self-righteousness.

In spite of this far more critical theological and ideological approach, compared to his earlier 'divine love / non-violence' framework, there are important elements of continuity in his thinking. Probably the most important are his focus on the Christian understanding of the human person and the community. His critique on liberal thinking made him aware that the human person is not result of human efforts but is essentially a divine gift. Similarly, his critique on individualism helped him to understand that the human person is profoundly a person-in-community. This theological basis for understanding the human person as a divine gift becomes the ground for prophetic witness. His critique on modern society, its disintegration and search for totalitarian solutions, challenged him to develop a kind of a 'negative theology': in the name of humanity, the Christian has to formulate a prophetic witness against dehumanizing social,

<sup>7</sup>M.M.Thomas, *Ideological Quest within Christian Commitment 1939-1954*. Madras: CLS, 1983, pp. 1ff.

<sup>8</sup> Republished in *Ideological Quest ...*, p.36.

<sup>9</sup> Republished in *Ideological Quest ...*, p.100.

economic and political forces. For this reason, Thomas never fully embraced Marxism and rejected its totalitarian interpretations of human reality.

While emphasising the discontinuity between human efforts and divine grace, he further developed his understanding of the church. Influenced by St. Augustine's reflections on the two cities, Thomas saw the church as the order of grace, while the social organisation, the state, represents the order of law. It is interesting to see that Thomas sees the struggle for justice as being part of the order of law which is necessary but at the same time problematic. In 1945, he wrote: "Justice means the affirmation of the due rights of human nature; and rights mean also power to affirm them, for power is a constitutive element of the natural structure. Hence the problem of justice is a problem of power-politics."<sup>10</sup> True humanity, according to Thomas at that time, could only be found in the order of grace being the church. "Charity is not continuous with Justice in the fallen world. ... To live a responsible life is to live a life of tragic tension."<sup>11</sup>

This theology of the two cities was soon very much challenged by his own experience, but also by the dialogues with his colleagues in the WSCF, which he had joined in 1947 as its Asia secretary. His recognition of the tremendous task of the rebuilding of economic and political structures in the newly independent states in Asia, and especially his growing awareness of rapid social changes in these countries, made him aware that a 'negative theology' was not sufficient. A theology was needed that could give guidance to 'nation building'. His radical theological position was also challenged by his new colleagues. For instance, Philippe Maury wrote to him: "I must confess that I am very puzzled and disturbed by that dichotomy you establish between political and theological realms. ... In the same way, I should refuse to make any distinction between the theology of Justice and a theology of Grace. There is no justice but the justice of the Grace of Jesus Christ."<sup>12</sup> Exposure to the wider reality of Asia and engagement in ecumenical conversations, urged Thomas to rethink his theology.

Five years later, in 1952, in an address to the WCSF central committee, he confessed: "There was a time when I thought that the New Age of Christ was so much beyond history that it could be experienced in politics only as forgiveness and not as power, that political philosophy could be only a philosophy of sinful necessities where the Cross was relevant only as forgiveness to the politician, and not as qualifying politics, political parties, techniques and institutions as such." And he continued wondering: "Cannot forgiveness be realized as power in the structures of the collective and institutional life of man in society?"<sup>13</sup>

This question has guided him for the many years to come. Is the power of God's grace also redeeming and giving direction to the social, economic and political struggles for justice and peace? He had discovered that his early understanding of God's self-giving love, revealed through the 'transcendent *satyagrahi*', was not realistic enough to cope with the deadly forces in society. He also learned that a too strong separation between the order of grace and the order of law, would not help to root the struggle for justice in the reality of divine grace. In other words, a sound theological interpretation of the struggle for justice and peace needed a deeper reflection

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<sup>10</sup> *Ideological Quest ...*, p.131.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

<sup>12</sup> M.M.Thomas, *Some Theological Dialogues*. Madras: CLS, 1977, p.15.

<sup>13</sup> M.M.Thomas, *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*. Madras: CLS, 1978, p.36.

on, as he phrased it, the relation between salvation and humanisation. This would be a theology which provides a firm ground for prophetic witness, but at the same time helps Christians to take up the responsibility for participation in society. In other words, he arrived at what I called in my research a theology of prophetic participation.<sup>14</sup>

### *Salvation and humanisation*

‘Salvation and Humanisation’ is the title under which Thomas published his Carey Memorial Lectures of 1970 in Bangalore. In fact, the title captures his entire theological work in the first half of the 1970s. It includes his well-known studies on *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (1970), *The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ* (1976), and his *Man and the Universe of Faiths* (1975). In these publications, he further elaborated and applied a theological methodology which is still very relevant and useful, especially for the ecumenical pilgrimage of justice and peace, as we will see later.

The core of this methodology is as we saw above, a constant interaction between sociology of religion and theological of society. The question where to begin has been the subject of many theological debates. Several schools of Christian theology are convinced that any theology or missiology needs to begin with reflection on the Christian Gospel. Thomas was fully aware of these discussions. Reflecting on the mission perspective in his publication *Salvation and Humanisation*, he saw the value of both points of entry. “The question is not where you enter, but whether you reach a point where you are aware of the inter-relatedness of the historical and the eternal.”<sup>15</sup> When he later addressed a similar question from the perspective of inter-religious dialogue, he affirmed the need to put the human quest at the centre. “Our thesis is that dialogue among faiths at spiritual depth can best take place in the modern world at the point where they are all grappling with the spiritual self-understanding of modern man, and the problems of true self-realisation or fulfilment of true humanity within modern existence.”<sup>16</sup> In many of his writings, whether books, articles or comments on current affairs, he followed this approach. In his analysis of current social, economic and political developments, he tried to understand what is behind the facts and events. How to interpret their spiritual dimensions? Doing so his analysis focussed on the human self-understanding. “Christian theology is not just the Gospel but the interaction between the Gospel and the self-understanding of humans in every age”, he wrote in *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*.<sup>17</sup>

Several of his writings in the 1970s, focussed therefore on the theological interpretation of the human self-understanding in modern societies. This has raised several misunderstandings and conflicts especially with theologians from conservative and evangelical circles. The most ardent critique came from the evangelical missiologist Peter Beyerhaus who accused him of leading the ecumenical movement into a direction that replaces theology by anthropology which finally may

<sup>14</sup> I gave my study of the development of Thomas’ thinking the title *Theology of Prophetic Participation* as an expression of this search.

<sup>15</sup> *Salvation and Humanisation*, pp.9f.

<sup>16</sup> *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, pp.xi-xii. (The title of Thomas’ book shows an opposite approach to that of John Hick who called his lectures: *God and the Universe of Faiths*. Conform Thomas note at page vi.)

<sup>17</sup> M.M.Thomas, *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*. Delhi: ISPCK, 1981, p.55

lead to developing anti-Christian symptoms.<sup>18</sup> Also others did not always fully accept Thomas' approach as for instance correspondence with Bishop Newbiggin shows.<sup>19</sup>

The most systematic exploration of the meaning of human self-understanding can be found in *Man and the Universe of Faiths*. There he pointed at four important dimensions. Firstly, the human person experiences 'self' as freedom and power of creativity. Secondly, freedom is seen as self-determination and a search for self-identity. Thirdly, the modern human being sees the destiny of his/her 'self' in the involvement of history, the movement of human liberation. Finally, Thomas acknowledged a new awareness that human freedom is realised in universal love. This way of describing the developments in human self-understanding is in many ways interesting. Especially the focus on creativity and freedom is helpful in understanding modern scientific, technological, social and economic developments. The human being understands these developments as expressions of freedom and creativity. They are our historical destiny. At the same time, Thomas also acknowledged that there is a growing awareness that human freedom is realised in universal love, a new spirituality which is open for dialogue and relations, broadening the community to include all mankind.

Thomas did not begin with judging these developments as being good or bad. He rather tried to understand them as expressions of modern human self-understanding and was fully aware of the positive and negative, creative and destructive, sides of human freedom and creativity. It is precisely at this cutting edge that the Gospel needs to be interpreted. However, before doing so, he further deepened the analysis of human self-understanding from the religious perspective. What is the religious and theological interpretation of modern developments? Surprisingly, he pointed at the messianic nature of modern self-understanding. As an Indian thinker, he was fully aware of the vitality of Eastern religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the impact of Western politics, economy, science, technology and education, including Christian faith, has brought a new spiritual ferment to the Eastern religions. "Our thesis is that the universe of unitive faiths is today being brought into the 'anthropological' and 'theological' circle of messianic faiths in a radical way"<sup>20</sup>, he concluded. This interpretation of the developments allowed him to analyse the spiritual dimension of modern human self-understanding from the perspective of messianic faiths, whether religious or secular.

While analysing the messianic dimension of current developments, Thomas saw the need to get a deeper understanding of the nature of messianism. He referred to Berdyaev's distinction between the national messianism of the Conquering King and the universal messianism of the Suffering Servant. The endless conflict between these two messianisms became already clear in the history of the Hebrew people. The kings represented the national, conquering forces, while they were throughout the history of the Hebrew people challenged by the prophets calling for justice and peace in the name of God. This prophetic tradition is essential to Christian faith, as Berdyaev sees it. However, also the history of Christianity is a manifestation of the conflict between the

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that around 40 years later two students of Beyerhaus and Thomas, Thomas Schirrmacher and myself, were instrumental in bringing together the leadership of the World Evangelical Alliance and the World Council of Churches into a joint retreat (February 2015) as a significant sign of growing Christian unity.

<sup>19</sup> *Some Theological Dialogues*, chapter 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, p.45.



two messianisms. Berdyaev saw even a continuation of this fundamental conflict in the modern secular ideologies such as communism and capitalism.

Thomas used this interpretation of history as a continuous conflict between the messianism of the Conquering King and that of the Suffering Servant to explore what the Christian response to the modern search for human self-understanding needs to be. He saw three alternatives.<sup>21</sup> The first alternative is the one in which several conquering messiahs compete with one another leading to balances of power. This alternative will not lead to a human solution, as Thomas saw it: "For, with the power which technology has put at the disposal of messiahs, this becomes a balance of terror, with the sense of chaos and deadly conflict always at hand." One can recognise the truth of this observation in many of the current economic and political conflicts in different parts of the world.

The second alternative, Thomas observed, is to put a break on the growth of human freedom and creativity. This alternative means in a way the return of messianic faiths to the spirituality of what Thomas called the 'unitive' faiths. This is probably what many advocates of a 'green', sustainable development would see as the best alternative. Thomas saw the potential of this way, but had serious doubts about its viability: "Evidently, this path will help humankind to save itself from self-destruction in totalitarianism, but only at the cost of the responsibility of growth to mature manhood."<sup>22</sup> Thomas did not only reject this alternative as unrealistic. For him, growth of humanity towards a greater maturity is at the heart of his theological critique of the so-called 'unitive' religions. His experience of poverty, casteism, and oppression in the Indian society helped him to see that a static society sanctioned by religious beliefs, prevents growth towards a mature understanding of human freedom and creativity.

Therefore, he proposed a third alternative which does not stop growth and also does not lead to self-destruction. This alternative is "the path of the reinterpretation of the modern revolutionary forces and spirit within the framework of the messianism of the suffering servant and faith in the cruciform humanity in Christ as the ultimate destiny of mankind."<sup>23</sup> This sentence is key in Thomas' interpretation of the relation between salvation and humanisation. He translated his affirmation of the messianism of the suffering servant into a language that relates to the human self-understanding in modern developments, and coined in that discourse the concept of cruciform humanity.

Before further exploring what he meant with this concept, it is good to note the relevance of these three alternatives for the current ecumenical debates on justice and peace. It seems that in these debates several voices tend to support the second alternative, a stop to further growth. The ecumenical movement has in this respect a strong affinity with the so called 'green' social justice movements without exploring in depth the theological implications. Thomas' doubts about the second alternative and his proposal to explore a third, are rooted in his search for a Christian theological interpretation of freedom and creativity leading to justice and peace. One wonders what that exploration could mean for a better understanding of the ecumenical contribution in the

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<sup>21</sup> *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, pp.37ff.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

pilgrimage of justice and peace to the current ‘secular’ debates on sustainable development, conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

### **‘Cruciform humanity’**

In order to fully understand what Thomas meant with his concept of cruciform humanity, it is important to study his more general observations on Christology. He developed his Christological reflections primarily in dialogue with the major religious and ideological streams in India, especially Hinduism and secular ideologies. Being aware of the religious plurality in the India and Asia, he stated that there is also need for more than one Christology. He wrote: “There is therefore the need for pluralism in Christology to meet the diverse needs of the situation. We must think in terms of Christologies rather than Christology. Each type will have its own apologetic problems ... The Indian religious tradition is more prone to emphasise the divinity of Jesus at the cost of his humanity ... The peril from secular temper is that it might deprive Christ of his divine nature.”<sup>24</sup> His preference for contextualising Christology again underlines Thomas’ theological methodology of moving forward and backward between social and religious analysis and theological reflection.

He extensively developed his Christological reflections in relation to Renascent Hinduism. The primary question in this dialogue is the relation between the universality and particularity of Jesus Christ. Several Hindu thinkers do not have difficulties with the universality of Christ. Mahatma Gandhi affirmed the universality of the message of Christ. The sacrificial love proclaimed by Christ gave full support to Gandhi’s principle of *ahimsa*. But Gandhi, Thomas observed, did not “move through the principles to the Person”.<sup>25</sup> The essence of incarnation is that Jesus Christ was fully divine but at the same time fully human. In order to emphasise the particularity and historicity of Jesus Christ, Thomas frequently stressed the need to locate him in the prophetic tradition in the history of the Hebrew people.

The inter-relation between universality and particularity of Jesus Christ is important for the way in which one understands his crucifixion and resurrection. Thomas never supported the theological view of the divine absence in the event of the cross. He rather understood the cross as a moment of divine revelation. One can find this interpretation already in his meditations of the 1930s; it was still the core of his understanding the 1970s and 1980s. Reflecting on Revelation 13:8, he explained that “the Book of Revelation speaks of the Cross as the eternal reality in the life of God, with the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world”.<sup>26</sup> The cross reveals God as a suffering God whose very nature is self-giving love. However, different than in the 1930s, he later gave a far more critical dimension to this interpretation of the cross.

This more critical interpretation was certainly influenced by his deeper involvement in the social, economic and political struggles in India. It was certainly also influenced by the ecumenical debates on liberation theology and people’s theologies. In a sermon on ‘The meaning of the Cross for our Times’ on Good Friday 1972, he said: “The Cross is the identification of God with

<sup>24</sup>“Editorial: The Christological Task of India”, *Religion and Society*, Vol.XI, No.3, September 1964, pp.5f.

<sup>25</sup>*The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*, p.239

<sup>26</sup>M.M.Thomas, *New Creation in Christ*. Delhi: ISPC, 1976, p.18.

the suffering of the poor and the oppressed, of the refugee and the disinherited, of the Negro and the outcaste, and is therefore a source of hope for their liberation and their future".<sup>27</sup> This clearly shows how Thomas saw a great value in liberation theology as it emphasises the divine solidarity with the suffering of human beings.

However, the divine solidarity with the suffering is only one dimension in his interpretation of Jesus Christ's crucifixion. His writings show also another dimension which is rooted in his theological developments of the 1940s, when he discovered that the fundamental human problem is not that of lack of righteousness but the inherent tendency towards self-righteousness. Reflecting on this aspect of the cross, he came closer to the classical theologies of justification by faith. In his attempt to develop theological insights for a secular anthropology, he pointed at the centrality of divine forgiveness: "The Cross of Jesus is also the answer to the human problem of justification of human existence. Responding in faith to the free Divine forgiveness and acceptance offered by the Crucified, man is released from the necessity to seek security and justification by his own spirituality and moral or social idealism."<sup>28</sup> Here he highlighted the liberating aspect of divine forgiveness in an almost pastoral way. At other places he pointed at the far more critical dimension of the need of faith in divine forgiveness. Acceptance of divine forgiveness and divine grace is the only way to avoid that self-righteousness ends up in violence and destruction in the name of secular or religious ideals of good or God.

As we have seen earlier, this attempt to find a theological basis for resistance to human self-righteousness turning violent has been the ground for his prophetic witness against totalitarian ideologies and regimes. However, it was also his theological motivation to be cautious with people's movements and people's theologies. In his address to the 5<sup>th</sup> assembly of East Asia Christian Conference, July 1973, reviewing the Introduction of *E.A.C.C.-Urban Industrial Project Report*, he affirmed the need to work together in the Asian struggle for liberation and justice. But he also expressed his hesitation to the spirit of the report: "I find it difficult to identify the People with the Messiah, and people's movement of liberation with the movement of the revelation of God and the Kingdom in history – which the Introduction tends to do."<sup>29</sup> And then he continued to give a theological motivation: "Such idolatry of the people will only bring into the movement of justice a spirit and ideology of self-righteousness which will betray the human ends of liberation from within." This observation reminds us of the warnings of people like Berdyaev and Reinhold Niebuhr who taught Thomas that revolutions easily turn to be self-righteous, destroying its own children.

Thomas saw the need to further develop in an interrelated way the two dimensions of his understanding of the cross: the divine solidarity with the suffering as well as the divine grace as judgement of self-righteousness. He is also aware that these two dimensions have led to severe tensions in the ecumenical movement at different levels. Especially, in the period after the 4<sup>th</sup> assembly in Uppsala, 1968, when liberation theology in all its varieties emerged and the tension was growing between supporters of those theologies and the advocates of the more traditional theological interpretations of cross and resurrection. In his address as moderator of the central committee to the 5<sup>th</sup> assembly of the WCC in Nairobi, 1975, he referred to this growing tension

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p.13

<sup>28</sup>*The Secular Ideologies of India and the Secular Meaning of Christ*, p.199.

<sup>29</sup>*Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p.203.

in the ecumenical family and beyond that between the ecumenical and evangelical theologians and churches. As an Indian ecumenical leader and theologian, he fully supported the struggle for justice in solidarity with the poor and oppressed. He saw the need for changing the existing power structures as an important agenda for the ecumenical movement. But he wondered: “How can the struggles and conflicts to bring human dignity to the poor and the oppressed, even the power politics which oppose institutionalized violence with counter-violence, be kept within the spiritual framework of the ultimate power of the crucified Christ and the ultimate goal of recognition of all people in Christ?”<sup>30</sup> For him it was important to see that our struggles, even our struggles for justice, have a penultimate nature. He quoted the Latin American liberation theologian J. Miguez Bonino: “None of our battles is the final battle. None of our enemies facing us is the final enemy, the ultimate evil. ... Similarly, it prevents us from seeing our achievements in absolute terms”. He also went back to Beryaev, affirming that “Christians know that social justice will not solve all human problems”. For Thomas the key question, so relevant for the debates in the Nairobi assembly, was: “How can the Church be the visible expression of this double awareness, that of the significance and urgency of all politics of justice, on the one hand, and that of the ultimate tragic character and the inescapable relativity of all historical achievements, on the other?” He wondered how the church can participate in the struggle for justice with this awareness and concluded that “We need a theology of political engagement that will help Christians and churches in such participation, a theology that will clarify the dialectical relation between faith and ideology in the light of the cross and resurrection”.<sup>31</sup>

The dialectics between the ultimate and the penultimate was developed further by him in his reflections on the meaning of cross and resurrection in relation to the human self-understanding. Taking up elements of his early theology, he stressed the need to look at the cross and resurrection as a revelation of the divine way of addressing dehumanising forces in their manifold manifestations. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ has to be understood as one event or movement. Resurrection is not God’s victory *over* the cross, but as the victory of God’s way *of* the cross. “The Cross is the Kingdom of God moving with power into the history of mankind, taking control of the powers of this world, bringing to men the righteousness of God in which every man becomes a brother for whom Christ died.”<sup>32</sup> Here the two dimensions, as described earlier, are coming together from the perspective of the overwhelming life-giving power of the way of the cross, affirmed by God in the resurrection. He developed this thinking further from the perspective of the risen Christ as the first fruits of the new creation.

His reading of the letters of St. Paul and the influence of the reflections at the WCC assembly in Uppsala, 1968, especially around the document ‘Renewal in Mission’, helped him to deepen his understanding of the meaning of cross and resurrection for quest for human self-understanding. He increasingly used the phrase ‘new humanity’ as he articulated in *Salvation and Humanisation*: “Jesus Christ and the New Humanity offered in Him are presented as the spiritual foundation, the source of judgement, renewal and ultimate fulfilment of the struggle of mankind today for its humanity.”<sup>33</sup> The concept of new humanity gave him a theological answer to the

<sup>30</sup> David Paton (ed.), *Breaking Barriers Nairobi 1975*. London/Grand Rapids: SPCK/ Eerdmans, 1976, p.239.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.240.

<sup>32</sup> *New Creation in Christ*, p.20. While reading passages like these, one notices how Thomas’ language reflects the lack of gender awareness of those days.

<sup>33</sup> *Salvation and Humanisation*, p.4.

quest for human self-understanding expressed in the search for freedom and creativity in the current developments.

Although Thomas' use of language suggests that he understood salvation as personal salvation, he increasingly made clear that God's grace revealed through cross and resurrection concerns the human, social and the cosmic dimensions of creation. As we have seen earlier, he already wondered whether salvation could include redemption of the collective and institutional aspects of life. In his later writings he also included the cosmic dimensions while reflecting on the risen Christ as the first fruit of the new creation. Some of the critical voices, however, have stated that this broader concept of salvation has not led him to a well-developed theology of care for creation. Probably he was too much engaged in the social questions of the 1970s and 1980s.

His concept of 'cruciform humanity' has the potential to be elaborated as Christological startingpoint for a prophetic participation in the struggle for social and ecological justice. While the concept of 'new humanity' primarily refers to the reality of the resurrected Christ, the concept of 'cruciform humanity' points more to the life-giving power of the way of the cross. It brings together the perspectives of hope through faith in resurrection and the moral perspectives of the suffering servant. The concept of 'cruciform humanity' does not block the further development of human freedom and creativity but redefines them from the perspective of the divine revelation in cross and resurrection. This means that the search for human self-understanding in the modern social, economic and political developments needs to be nurtured and guided by a spirituality of cruciform humanity.

### ***Spirituality***

When he in his moderator's address to the Nairobi assembly struggled with the tensions in the ecumenical movement around the understanding of Jesus Christ crucified and resurrected, he pointed at the need for a stronger focus on spirituality. It should be noted that in the 1970s many became aware that spirituality is an important dimension in the Christian struggle for justice. In his closing address to the assembly in Nairobi, the then General Secretary Phillip Potter characterized the 1960s as a period of Exodus: "At Uppsala the mood was one of Exodus, going out to change the structures of society and the relations between persons, especially between races. Now we find ourselves in the wilderness. A pilgrim people in conflict and penury, we have discovered a need for spirituality, a spirituality of penitence and hope."<sup>34</sup> He referred not only to the changes in the ecumenical movement, but also if not more to the disappointment in the nation building processes in many newly independent countries. The initial optimism that justice and peace could be established through a short period of struggle turned into disappointment and frustration. Many realised that justice and peace is not around the corner and that the struggle for it would take a long period.

Also Thomas saw the need for a spirituality that would help people to walk this long road towards justice and peace. In his lectures at the UTC in Bangalore, 1980, published as *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, he explained: "We should find a spirituality which can keep people in the power-struggle without turning corrupt and oppressor. Here the gospel of forgiveness or justification by faith has great relevance to collective liberation movements, in

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<sup>34</sup> *Breaking Barriers*, p.208

moulding their spirituality for struggle, liberating the liberation movements from becoming self-idolatrous.”<sup>35</sup>He identified two possible dangers when the struggle for justice becomes seemingly endless. One danger is that defeatism: people lose hope and give up the power-struggles for justice. The other danger is that people betray the struggle for justice by radicalism, turning corrupt, oppressive and self-idolatrous. A spirituality that can help people to avoid these two dangers has to be informed, as he saw it, by a theology in which the struggle for justice is rooted in the Gospel of divine grace.

In the second half of the 1970s, he frequently used the phrase ‘spirituality for combat’. Although many ascribe this expression to Thomas himself, it was actually David Jenkins, the director of the WCC Humanum Studies (1969-1975), who closed his paper ‘Theological Inquiry Concerning Human Rights’ with proposal to develop a ‘spirituality for combat’: “Perhaps what Christians are particularly called to work out (probably along with men of other faiths and conscience, religious commitments) is what might be called a spirituality for combat ... How might we help one another to so conduct our struggles that they become part of our worship?”<sup>36</sup> This call for a ‘spirituality for combat’ resonated with the need for a new stage in the ecumenical commitment to justice and peace, as felt by so many in those days.

Thomas began his exploration of the significance of spirituality for the people’s struggle already in the early 1970s. In his opening address to the CWME conference on ‘Salvation Today’, in Bangkok 1972, he reflected on spirituality defining it as follows: “Human spirituality, one might say, is the way in which man, in the freedom of his self-transcendence, seeks a structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness within which he can fulfil or realize himself in and through his involvement in the bodily, the material and the social realities of his life on earth.”<sup>37</sup>A number of elements are important in this definition. First of all Thomas was convinced that spirituality needs to come alive through the involvement in the day-to-day reality of human life. Within this reality the human being has the freedom of self-transcendence. This freedom is important for Thomas, especially in his assessment of Hinduism and the secular ideologies in India. He rejected the divine or cosmic determinism of Hinduism, but he also criticised the economic determinism of Marxist-Leninism. As we have seen earlier, human freedom and creativity are essential elements in Thomas’ theology.

Apart from participation in the historical reality and the gift of transcendence, Thomas adds a third element to his understanding of spirituality, namely transformation or renewal. Referring to dialogues with secular and religious faiths, he said: “Human spirituality is integrally related to the sense of human self-hood, in which it knows itself to be *participating* in the necessities of nature and *transcending* nature in a historical destiny and *transforming* nature in relation to that destiny. Man’s relation to Nature is characterised by participation, transcendence and transformation.”<sup>38</sup>It is our participation in society that needs to be transformed. He frequently used Beryaev’s expression that the problem of my own bread is a material question whereas the problem of my neighbour’s bread is a spiritual question. Thomas concept of spirituality has very

<sup>35</sup> *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p.53.

<sup>36</sup> David Jenkins, ‘Theological Inquiry Concerning Human Rights’, *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol.XXVII, No.2, April 1975, p.103.

<sup>37</sup> *Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p.179.

<sup>38</sup> *Religion and the Revolt of the Oppressed*, p.54. Italics by Thomas.

much the nature of transformative spirituality, the importance of which has again been highlighted in the latest ecumenical mission affirmation *Together Towards Life*.

With these three dimensions of spirituality in mind, we have to go back to his address to the CWME meeting in Bangkok in which he made a distinction between true and false spiritualities. The core of the definition he offered in that address is that the human being seeks “a structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness” as a reference and inspiration for participation, transcendence and transformation. The choice of the right ‘structure’ becomes therefore very important. Thomas assessed the different religions and secular ideologies with this question in mind: do they encourage participation, do they acknowledge transcendence, and do they inspire transformation? And again he comes back to his Christological startingpoint: “The secular strivings for fuller human life should be placed and interpreted in their real relation to the ultimate meaning and fulfilment of human life revealed in the divine humanity of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

### ***A pilgrimage of justice and peace***

As stated in the beginning, the key question of this address is to learn what Thomas’ reflections could mean for our understanding of a pilgrimage of justice and peace as called for at the 10<sup>th</sup> assembly of the WCC in Busan, 2013. Are his theological reflections still relevant, knowing that the social, economic and political realities have changed and the ecumenical movement has entered a new phase? What would have been his comments to the central committee of 2016 on the pilgrimage if he still would have been the moderator?

Perhaps a number of aspects in his thinking may be helpful while the WCC and its member churches and ecumenical partners try to shape the pilgrimage of justice and peace for the coming years. They are:

#### ***1. A refining of the theological methodology***

The WCC central committee adopted, in its meeting of July 2014, a paper in which the different aspects of the pilgrimage of justice and peace are described.<sup>40</sup> This paper highlights three dimensions of the pilgrimage which might be seen as the beginning of a theological methodology. It distinguishes between celebrating the gifts (*via positiva*), visiting the wounds (*via negativa*), and transforming the injustices (*via transformativa*). The first dimension proposes to celebrate God’s great gift of life, the beauty of creation and the unity of a reconciled diversity. The second dimension leads to the places of violence and injustices in which God’s incarnated presence in the midst of suffering, exclusion and discrimination, is discerned. The third dimension leads to concrete acts of transformation encouraging a life in true compassion with each other and with nature. These three dimensions remind us of the methodology of ‘see, judge and act’ as common in several liberation theologies.

Thomas would probably not deny the value of this approach. However, studying his writings, one discovers that his methodology showed a refinement which might be helpful for a

<sup>39</sup>*Towards a Theology of Contemporary Ecumenism*, p.181

<sup>40</sup>‘An Invitation to the Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace Revised’, Central Committee, July 2-8, 2014, Geneva Switzerland, Document No.5 rev.

pilgrimage of justice and peace. In his analysis of what the central committee paper calls the *via negativa* he added a few steps which do not immediately lead to judging what is wrong but rather to a deeper understanding of what is behind injustice and oppression. Reviewing what he sees as current events and movements, he tried to analyse the revolutionary forces in today's reality, than interpret the human self-understanding in them, and finally discern the spiritual dimension in the human self-understanding. At that level, he formulated what the response of Christian faith might be reflecting the elements of God's gift of life and cruciform humanity. Doing so, he avoided a too easy shortcut between social analysis and biblical moral teachings which often do not reach the heart of the struggle for justice and peace.

This is the first line of interpretation: moving from analysing the events and movements towards interpreting the human self-understanding and finally reflecting on the spiritual dimension. The second line of refinement of his analysis is the way back from reading the Scriptures towards understanding the day-to-day reality. For instance, his theological reflection on the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ helped him to see the reality from a specific perspective. His discovery of the theological value of the concept of cruciform humanity helped him to see more clearly the messianic nature of the human self-expression in freedom and creativity. His methodological approach is therefore not only moving from analysis towards theological response, but a double movement, moving forward and backward between sociology of religion and theology of society.

One could object that this methodology has a too strong anthropological focus, ignoring the fact that the current oppressive systems not only have an impact on human life but beyond that on the environment, endangering the future of all life on earth. Thomas would not deny this wider impact on the entire creation, but would probably also assert that the human being is the determining factor in the current processes of social, economic and ecological injustices. For him that was the reason to discern the dimensions of human self-understanding in the current destructive processes but also to address the responsibility of humans to transform destruction into life-embracing creativity.

## 2. *Revisiting Christology*

Although Thomas did not deny the importance of faith in the Holy Trinity, his theology is at the core Christology. In that sense he fully resonated with the theological focus of his days, in the ecumenical movement as well as in the wider theological circles. Today the ecumenical theological reflection has shifted its emphasis more towards pneumatology. A good example of this shift is the new ecumenical mission affirmation *Together Towards Life*. While the earlier mission statement of the World Council of Churches affirmed the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ and his salvation, the new statement highlights "some key developments in understanding the mission of the Holy Spirit within the mission of the Triune God (*mission Dei*)".<sup>41</sup> The new statement elaborates this approach under four headings: 1) Spirit of mission: breath of life; 2) Spirit of liberation: mission from the

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<sup>41</sup>*Together Towards Life. Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, paragraph 11.



margins; 3) Spirit of community: Church of the move; and 4) Spirit of Pentecost: good news for all.

One wonders whether Thomas would have easily embraced this shift. His theology was not only too much shaped by the discussions of his time; the focus on the work of the Holy Spirit without constantly rooting it in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ might easily lead to a superficial interpretation of the darker side of human nature, or perhaps one should say, the darker side of all life. How does the pneumatological approach help to understand the deep abyss of wilful destruction and the self-righteous rejection of the life-giving community?

The theological problem here is that the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not only great signs of divine grace and a solid ground for our hope. The cross is as much an indicator of human reality. In the light, or rather the shadow, of the cross we discover who we are. In that sense, the cross and resurrection are not only the answer to our reality, they also help us to understand our reality. The current general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, pointed to this aspect of the cross and resurrection in his sermon during the installation service in 2010. In an article based on that sermon he explained: “The cross is more than a sign of our religious identity. It is the ‘reality check’ of our churches of our ministry, of our ecumenical movement, of our faith.”<sup>42</sup> He then refers to Martin Luther’s saying: *Crux probat omnia*, the cross puts everything to the test. This everything includes the dehumanising forces which we see in religious, social, economic, and political developments.

A pilgrimage of justice and peace needs therefore to be based on a Trinitarian theology in which the divine revelation of grace and judgement becomes a point of entry to analyse and understand the realities of injustice and oppression as much as a source of hope that inspires transformation.

### **3. *Elaborating the concept of cruciform humanity for ethical guidance***

The urge to discern the meaning of a Trinitarian theology for a pilgrimage of justice and peace is related to the need to further reflect on Thomas’ concept of cruciform humanity. This concept has the potential to become a guiding principle for Christian life and more specifically the Christian involvement in the struggle for justice and peace as well as an inspirational motive for developing a pilgrimage-spirituality. The concept has deep roots in the history of Christianity and its spiritual fathers and mothers. For instance, several relevant aspects can be found in Thomas à Kempis’ *The Imitation of Christ*.<sup>43</sup> Thomas seemed to have used these ancient Christian spiritual traditions but placed them in the wider context of the Christian involvement for the struggle of justice and peace.

There is a related aspect which has not been central in Thomas’ writings. Christians in several parts of the world experience persecution, especially today now several religions go through reviving radicalism and violence. Several Orthodox Church leaders in the Middle

<sup>42</sup>Olav Fykse Tveit, *Christian Solidarity in the Cross of Christ*. Geneva: WCC Publications, 2012, p. 14.

<sup>43</sup>Thomas was inspired by this book already in the early 1930s.

East, but also Pope Francis, point at the new experiences of martyrdom. Martyrdom is not seen by them as necessarily negative, but as an essential marker of following Christ. Further reflection on Thomas' concept of cruciform humanity needs to include a fuller understanding of martyrdom, including the question what cruciform humanity means for churches and Christians that do not experience martyrdom.

#### **4. *Need to root the understanding of justice and peace in faith in divine grace***

Further reflection on the pilgrimage needs to include a deeper understanding of the concepts of justice and peace. Usually, it is taken for granted that we know what justice and peace mean. Lack of theological reflection on these concepts might result in uncritically copying them from a secular discourse. Then the question is for instance: Does the ecumenical movement follow the theory of justice as developed by John Rawls or is the egalitarian understanding of justice as supported by socialism embraced?

Thomas was convinced that the concepts of justice and peace need to be interpreted from a theological perspective. As we have seen earlier, he understood the struggle for justice as part of necessary power-politics. Following Reinhold Niebuhr's warning that power easily leads to corruption and violence, Thomas frequently cautioned of the self-righteous tendencies in the struggles for justice. He expressed the need to understand justice in the context of divine righteousness: the struggle for justice has a *pen-ultimate* nature needs to be inspired as well as guided by the *ultimate* reality of divine grace and judgement. Can this approach help us to develop a theological understanding of these important concepts in the pilgrimage?

#### **5. *Developing a spirituality of pilgrimage to keep people on the right track between defeatism and radicalism***

Thomas' plea to develop a theological understanding of justice was undergirded by his proposals to have a spirituality that keeps one on the right track between defeatism and radicalism. Both options are part of the reality in the churches and in the ecumenical movement. There are several theological traditions in the Christian history that have given up the struggle for justice and peace. Some have done so because their faith convictions are deeply rooted in a two-cities theology. They consider this world as being lost. Others believe that the church should not interfere in political matters. Again others have given up their involvement in justice and peace efforts out of complacency, believing that social, economic and political realities are too complex and too much determined by forces beyond our control.

The other option is to end up in radicalism and violence in the name of justice and peace. Religious radicalism and violence have become again an urgent concern in many religions. Also Christianity is known for religious radicalism and violence at certain stages in its history. In other instances Christian faith has been used by political forces to legitimise violence and oppression.

Thomas' saw the need for a spirituality which is able to help people to avoid defeatism and radicalism. Can his insights help the pilgrimage of justice and peace to keep people on the

right track? Can we find 'a structure of ultimate meaning and sacredness' that gives the courage to work for justice and peace without resorting into radicalism? Thomas' theological thinking provides us with a relevant approach that is worth exploring further.

### ***Conclusion***

This review of Thomas' theology started with the question what would happen if he still would have been the moderator of the central committee? Would he have encouraged the World Council of Churches, its member-churches and ecumenical partners to embark on the pilgrimage of justice and peace? Studying his writings, I conclude that he certainly would have welcomed the call from the assembly. At the same time he would have raised a number of critical questions as a positive contribution to the development of a right theological approach to the pilgrimage. He probably would have offered the concept of cruciform humanity as a startingpoint for further reflection on practical and spiritual engagement. He would have challenged us to deepen our understanding of justice and peace from a theological perspective. He would have encouraged us to develop a spirituality that can prevent the pilgrim from ending the journey in defeatism and from self-righteously marching on into the extreme, losing a reflective eye on God's grace.