Political Struggle and Renewal

INTRODUCTION

'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Mk.12:17) But all belongs to God who is to receive glory and honor and power as creator and sustainer and redeemer of all. How should churches in mission behave toward the successors to Caesar? What values (faith commitments, ethical presumptions) do we bring to our involvement in the political struggle and renewal taking place in our own day?

Of the many issues involved in this theme, the workshop will focus first on the values which Christians in mission bring to political struggle and renewal, and second on particular case studies in Africa.

Third World theologians, meeting in Delhi in 1981 for their fifth international conference, chose as their theme "The Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology". They described the contemporary political struggle of peoples as the dawning of a new era and the movement as the

irruption of the exploited classes, marginalized cultures, and humiliated races. They are bursting from the underside of history into the world long dominated by the West. It is an irruption expressed in revolutionary struggles, political uprisings and liberation movements. It is an irruption of religious and ethnic groups looking for affirmation of their authentic identity, of women demanding recognition and equality, of youth protesting the dominant systems and values. It is an irruption of all those who struggle for full humanity and for their rightful place in history."

Political struggle is accepted as a basic human reality of contemporary society. With such an acceptance goes an assumption that persons and institutions in society can be changed, can be renewed.

VALUES WE BRING TO POLITICAL STRUGGLE AND RENEWAL

Acceptance of political struggle and hope for renewal are not new phenomena. They can be grounded in biblical faith and understanding of mission. It was the apostle Paul who wrote:

the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...as we wait for adoption... For in this hope we were saved" (Romans 8:21-24)

Christians profess that God is actively at work creating, judging and redeeming not only through the institutional church but through the very process of political change through which persons are aspiring towards a more just and humane society.
Although Christians may differ on specific political institutions, policies and practices a broad consensus exists on the definition of a "responsible society". That given at the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam in 1948, edited with inclusive language, would read:

Each person is created and called to be a free being, responsible to God and to neighbor. Any tendencies in State and society depriving persons of the possibility of acting responsibly are a denial of God's intention for persons and God's work of salvation. A responsible society is one where freedom is the freedom of persons who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it.

When applied to contemporary political realities such an affirmation is a basic for evaluating various political systems as well as movements for political change. Do they allow persons to act responsibly as political agents? Do those holding political power acknowledge their responsibility to the people for acting justly? Do they acknowledge their responsibility to God however they may define a transcendent authority?

There can be no separation of religion from politics when such questions are asked, nor a division of action into two separate kingdoms. In traditional African societies, for example, there was no separation of the sacred from the secular. Political leaders often performed religious functions, and the divine powers were believed to affect profoundly all of life. This holistic world view continues today as African political leaders affirm the relevance of religious values in political decision-making, and religious leaders aspire for political office.

On the one hand, a government should have a philosophy of the common good. On the other hand, the church in its mission to the world should have a prophetic relation to government. Often this involves a conflict of values. It may involve a conflict of Institutions as well. Wherever the state aspires after authoritarian control over decision-making in society, over the processes of inculcating values and discussing issues (the educational system and the mass media), conflicts between Church and State will be intensified. Wherever the state is responsive to the needs of only a portion of society, be it an economic or racial or religious or ethnic group, then the Church ought to be responsive especially to those marginalized or oppressed, becoming the voice of the voiceless. To do so inevitably involves the Church in mission in political struggle, and hopefully in a process of political renewal.

Charles West expressed well this role as he wrote:

The church must project Christ's lordship into the search for a proper structure of justice and peace in society, which is also the business of political authorities. It must do so holistically, not taking refuge in the false purity either of nonpolitical projects or a romanticized oppressed people. It must do so in a secular way, recognizing the involvement of every religious project in the mixed motives and misused powers of human life, the need of correction, and