

## THE POOR TAKE OVER

(text of the Response to Christian Aid's Statement of Commitment, entitled 'Strengthen the Poor')

Your Statement of Commitment of July 1987 was sent out, to use your own words, "as a basis for action and reflection". If you substitute a hyphen for the conjunction **and**, you will have in summary form my own initial reaction to the Statement. In fact, very early in its formulation, the Statement indicates, by asking for "cycles of action, reflection commitment and renewed obedience", just the kind of ideal response which I have tried to express: reflection action - reflection - further action not as four or as two processes, but as one process: reflection making inaction an impossible betrayal, and action demanding further intensities of reflection.

My response to your Statement is made from a particular viewpoint and from a particular standpoint. The latter is more important. We have not only to look at society in a particular sort of way; we have to do something about it. "The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it." My perspective and standpoint are those of Satyodaya. There the perspective reveals a mass of little people, people who do not matter even to themselves. The standpoint is to be for these people, with them to work for their release from the structures of injustice and oppression and for the achievement of a just human society in which the ideal is that each will give according to ability and receive according to need. And how would you seek to give life to your Statement? As we would at Satyodaya to our own, which would not be dissimilar, by a proper understanding of religion and/or in the ideals of socialist humanism.

For us it is probably easier than for you to combine reflection and action, to have both a viewpoint and a standpoint. For we are in a country of poor people tea estate people and village people and urban slum dwellers. Our reflection, prayer, viewpoint can never be oblivious of the context. And the context obliges us if we think seriously about it to do all we can to change it. We do it as religious people in the strict sense, if we can. If not, as religious people in the broader sense, that is, as humanists.



The masses combine action-reflection, viewpoint-standpoint wonderfully in the struggle for life against overwhelming odds. Some of these odds have come from the extremes of tropical nature, the immense rivers which overflow their banks in times of monsoonal rains or dry up in times of drought, the every hot energy-sapping weather and sleep-denying mosquitoes. Others have come from the evils of the socio-political system and in recent centuries from imperialism and colonialism. Yet the masses have watched imperial powers come and go, persisting in their determination to live, basically self-confident, storing the memories of the past, yet looking forward to the day when their children will win and will finally inherit the earth. But let us not romanticize the masses. They are determined to live in the structures. They are not always determined to change them.

Now the question is this. Do the people need Satyodaya for social change? Does Satyodaya need Christian Aid? I have told this story before, but it bears re-telling. One day a few years ago I was standing under a tree with large spreading branches on the banks of the Parakrama Samudra, an immense artificial reservoir of rain water built in North-Central Sri Lanka during the time of King Parakrama Bahu in the twelfth century. As I was gazing at that large expanse of water and thinking of how it came to be there, a fairly old weather beaten Sinhalese villager, a towel characteristically slung over his bare shoulder, walked up to me just as a brand new limousine deposited behind me a bunch of affluent white tourists, with their complete gear of sun hats, dark glasses, cameras and binoculars. The villager told me, "What are you thinking about? Do you really think we need these people to build something like this again." I should like you to have a similar experience the next time you visit the Victoria project built with British aid on the Mahaweli river not far from where I live in Kandy. The result will be reflection which makes inaction impossible. History has much evidence to lead us to suspect that foreign aid is not indispensable for a whole people to rise. But the right kind of assistance at the right time may make the wheels of history turn earlier and faster.

#### **Your statement says:**

The majority of the world's people have scarcely enough to keep them alive. They have little or no say in what happens to them. Unlike the strong, they cannot protect or further their own interests.



I hope, respectfully, that you really and truly believe what you have stated. If one or the other of you still has any doubt, go with my colleague at Satyodaya, Piyasoma, to the village of Kap-ela, 7 miles from Dambulla, and the furthest of our field workplaces. There are 54 families there. In the dry season they have virtually nothing else to eat but a kind of millet called kurakkan. When the rains come, they have no money to buy seed. The nearest dispensary is 7 miles away. The school is at a distance of two miles and is only a primary school and not all the children have the clothes to go to school anyway. Does Kap-ela need Christian Aid to strengthen their arm.

Until they stand up to those who so often act against them and have the power to determine their own development?

Here my answer is that it does because it needs Piyasoma and Piyasoma is possible because of Christian Aid. When persons from Kap-ela first began to come the 50 miles to Satyodaya - for seminars, for discussions, to borrow books from the central circulating library they seemed to be very much like the Tamil estate workers when they first began to come to us. They were obviously ill at ease, unsure whether they could even sit on our chairs, quite awed by the sound of the telephone and thrilled to watch the TV. This was two or three years ago. Today the situation is different, they interact with us quite normally, in the usual free and easy manner of the Sinhalese villager. Their arm has not yet been strengthened enough to take on the principalities and powers but, believe me, they are on the way. When that happens, we shall bow ourselves out and count it our hour of greatest glory.

To make sure that the People get there Satyodaya's and Christian Aid's dialectic of action-reflection must be firmly anchored in the concept of the People. The acid test whether any action it initiates is in accordance with its belief as expressed in its Statement is the extent to which such action reaches the People and becomes in time People's action.

First, the concept of the People. In any country, the elites are not the People. The elites are always a minority. Remember what one of your Lords said when there was a proposal during my undergraduate days to abolish the House of Lords? "But the House of Lords," he argued, "protects the minorities." "Which minority?" he was asked. "The rich" he answered "are always a minority." The elites indeed take great pains to maintain themselves as a minority by strictly controlling access of recruits to their charmed circle. The People are the overwhelming majority. They are not allowed to take decisions



but decisions are taken for them. They are not spoken with but are only spoken to or spoken at. History as recorded by the professional historians so far has not been the history of the People but the history of the elites, of the Tudors or the Stuarts, of King Dutugemunu who built the Ruwanwelisaya or of Churchill who won the last war. Little is said of what the People were achieving at the bottom of the pyramid while the elites were playing their little games at the top.

Second, how do we ensure action that reaches the People and becomes in time People's action? Precisely by believing in it so strongly and so totally that any other form of action becomes impossible. What we need is not just a nominal assent to the truth of the Statement, but a real assent to it. This means an assent that takes up the entirety of ourselves, informs every action we take and every other assent we give. We give a notional assent to a river when we know it as a current of water. We give it a real assent when we see it as a part of human history, nourishing millions of peasants down the ages or destroying them when it was angry, maybe from the time the world began. I recall the young man who once told me he knew the girl next door for years but it was utterly different from the day - he said it was a definite day - he knew he loved her.

But maybe it is expected that I try to say something more about the action that should be the consequence of your belief. 'If this is what you say you now believe, then what is it that you should be doing?' Your Statement speaks of a strategy for justice and says this.

This strategy for justice is not ours. We must pursue it in partnership with the poor and all who stand by them. We commit ourselves to partnership of mutual sharing and accountability which try to achieve in themselves the justice they seek everywhere.

Let me therefore now try to say what I think the strategy in partnership should be.

First, for each one of us individually who are members of this Staff Counsultation. Allow me to consider myself for the nonce as one of the Staff and say that it is an absolute and indispensable pre-condition of any strategy to strengthen the arm of the poor that each one of us should have taken a fundamental option for the poor, which means a fundamental option to be on the side of the poor - poor persons and poor nations - for their rights to what human society owes them in strict justice and has denied them for too long.



Living personally a poor life could be a help, but is no automatic guarantee of a fundamental option for the poor. I have known many missionaries who have lived very poor lives, on a diet, for instance, of little beyond rice and a watery curry, but had they taken a fundamental option to support the poor in the struggle for justice? So also the mere doing of charity is not in itself evidence of the fundamental option. Throughout its history, the Church has done much for the poor - alms at the gates of the old pre-Reformation monasteries, homes for the aged and for abandoned children, soup kitchens - but throughout its history since Constantine the Church has not espoused the cause of the poor, which is what the fundamental option is about. It is a sad thing to say, and as a Christian I share the responsibility for it, but I do not think the Church in Rome, Canterbury or Geneva, in India, in Sri Lanka or in Britain has taken a fundamental option for the poor and the oppressed (the poor are always oppressed). Think of the blacks in South Africa or of the Tamils in Sri Lanka and of what the Church has not done for them.

I am not sure at all whether one should personally lead an economically poor life in order to work effectively and with credibility for the poor. I am surer that one should live without attachment so that at the drop of a hat one could move from the West to the East end, or from a fairly comfortable bed at Satyodaya to a mat in an estate line-room. But I am surest of all that one should never be guilty of any form of ostentatious living. Hence I have personally found it a blatant contradiction about surveyors of foreign aid to poor countries who can live in these poor countries only in luxury hotels and on scandalously high salaries, all paid of course out of the Foreign Aid budget. How commute from the Intercontinental to the hovels where the poor live without being shown up to be a mercenary of foreign aid and a fraud? Far from disbursing Foreign Aid, these only live off it.

All our goods and chattels, our cars and our vans, our telephone, our TV, our video camera, our plane journeys are justifiable in a place like Satyodaya or Christian Aid only if they have a function in the realization of the fundamental option for the poor and if the poor know that they can have as much access to our facilities as anyone else.

Secondly, your strategy as a group. You need to be known in Britain and in all the countries where Christian Aid works as an organization that believes in the Statement and means to act in accordance with it. I agree that



We shall need to be sensitive about how we present it in certain quarters...  
We do not want to hide them (the ideas it contains) - far from it! but we shall need to explain and commend them.

but there should be no hesitancy or reservation about its basic thrust.

You need to be a group in which the members support one another in and around the Statement, the more convinced gently leading the less sure, the more courageous strengthening those who are of fainter heart.

Only a group metanoia - a total group repentance and a total group conversion - could have produced the Statement. Only continuing group metanoia can make it live. That is why I think that one of the most inspired phrases of the Statement is where it says that the poor are evangelists to us of God, of what God's concerns are, of what God must look like. And to those of us who do not believe in God, the poor can still be the best evangelists of the meaning and purpose of life. Third World groups in the First are those which have begun to respond to the evangel.

Thirdly, the strategy as regards your donors in Britain. I shall deliberately be brief because you have doubtless already thought a lot about it yourselves. I would merely say this. Those who wish you not to mix charity with politics are those who tell us not to mix religion and politics. It is their view of charity, religion, politics which needs to be corrected, maybe by referring them to Jesus of Nazareth who viewed all three in terms of the release of people from the structures of interhuman injustice and oppression. Release of the many from injustice and oppression means sooner or later confrontation with those who are unjust and oppress; strengthening the arm of the poor means collision sooner or later with those whose arm has to be proportionately weakened. Thus, though Christian Aid and its partners are not political organizations, they should be aware that there is a political dimension to both charity and religion.

Finally, there is the strategy vis-a-vis the beneficiaries of Christian Aid in the poor countries of the Third World. In my view, this strategy has to be conceived less as aid and more as partnership. Genuine, effective and equal partnership will mean that you need us much as we need you. It would go a long way to resolve an agonizing problem which the aided face in their relationship with the aiders. It is that while we hold up self-reliance as an ideal for our people, year after year we continue to be reliant on you. Maybe self-reliance is not the ideal we should hold up, but equal inter-reliance, but that is another question. For the present let us merely say that between genuine partners there should be no problem.



For strengthening the arm of the poor nations of the world, financial aid, after all, has a much smaller role to play than solidarity and making the truth known. What is the truth? I have the authority of Dr Percival Spear, author of Part II of the Pelican History of India, to say that at the time British power came to India at the end of the Mughal period, the standard of life of the masses in India was roughly the same as in Europe; indeed, in India it was probably higher. What happened after that? British raced forward and left India a whole Third World behind. How? By ruthless economic exploitation. When India was a great exporter of finished goods, Britain invoked protectionism. When Britain became an exporter of cheap machine-made goods, Britain imposed Free Trade upon India and thus ruined Indian industry for two crucial centuries. The rich countries are rich today and we are poor not because they are industrious and we lazy, not because it just happened that way, but because they exploited us when we were too politically and militarily weak to resist them. Japan is an exception, because Japan alone was never directly or indirectly colonized. This is not Third World hyde-parkism, but economic history, at least as it needs to be rewritten. What sort of solidarity and dedication to truth can Christian Aid give us to overcome the domination of the poor by the rich in industry, information, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, research and development? I do not know enough of the early history of Christian Aid to know whether it had a skimmed milk powder and biscuits phase but the Statement is evidence that it is now not content to alleviate suffering but wants to end it. But how far are you ready to go? Support even as sharing and accountability from you in here to us out there? Or are there ways where we can do more than this together? Should we look for a breaking point between coalition in mind and heart and coalition in the struggle?

Solidarity and truth, more than money, will strengthen the arm of the poor so that at some time in some future century we may be equal partners with everyone else in the more humane use of the resources of the world of which on one has any right to be more of a citizen than any other. At Satyodaya we may not appeal as the Statement does to "the better side of our human nature made as we believe, in God's image" but we certainly appeal to the centrality of the human person and the equality of all human persons, which is what humanism is about.

Long may Christian Aid survive with the vision that has made its Statement possible. Who knows but that in partnership, if it does not actually set the world on fire, it may yet make our world a slightly more human place for all of us to live in.



## Postscript

As I was writing the last lines of this response to your Statement, two Sinhalese women, working mothers, interrupted me to say that they had had nothing to eat, and wanted to know whether I could offer them work. My strong arm was powerless to strengthen their weak ones. But I continued writing in faith and hope.

Thank you.

- Paul Caspersz, S. J.

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## THE THREE TIMES OF THE JEWS

So far as our evidence goes, and in an historical development which remains largely enigmatic, the Jewish people invented monotheism. In radical hostility to all surroundings creeds and cultures, Judaism originated, and identified its own destiny with, the concept of an infinite, intangible, invisible, ethically imperative God. And of a God inseparable not only from every moment of the individual human being's day, but from the meaning and purpose of political and social history. In the Sermon on the Mount, in his parables, Jesus the Jew reiterated, sharpened to apocalyptic extremity, the moral demands, the uncompromising imperative of altruism of self-sacrifice, present in the Mosaic Law and in the visionary rigour of the Prophets. This summons to abnegation to the abolition of the ego and of private property and privilege - this annunciation of the inevitable, sacrificially-prepared coming of the kingdom of justice on earth, constitutes the core of that utterly Judaic secular messianism which we call Marxism. When Marx asks that man "exchange love for love, and justice for justice," he is speaking the exact language of Isaiah, of Amos, of the anarchist from Nazareth and Galilee.

Three times, Judaism has confronted Western Man with the merciless claims and exactions of the ideal. Three times - in its invention of monotheism, in the message of the radical Jesus, in Marxism and messianic - socialism - Israel has asked of ordinary men and women more than human nature wishes to give; more, it may be, than it is organically and physically able to give. Nothing is more cruel than it is organically and physically able to give. Nothing is more cruel than the blackmail of perfection. We come to hate, to fear most those who demand of us a self-transcendence, a surpassing of our natural and common limits of being. Our hate and fear are the more intense precisely because we know the absolute rightness, the ultimate desirability of the demand. In failing to respond adequately we fail ourselves. And it is of deep-lying self hatreds that hatreds spring.

— George Heiner

from "The Long Life of Metaphor"  
Encounter, 68, p. 59



*The above was sent to us by Fr Dalston Forbes, O. M. I.*

*The Jews have thought by the word and deed of their prophets: Moses, Jesus, Marx. But their people never seem to learn their own lessons. When Hitler slaughtered six million of them, one would have thought the Jews would have said, Never again will this be allowed to happen to mankind. Yet to day their Mossade and their terror squads are as cruel and unsparing as Hitler at his cruellest. - Ed.*

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## THE MONTHS OF JULY - SEPTEMBER 1987 AT SATYODAYA

*(We intend this brief commentative diary of recent events at Satyodaya to be an important means of communication with our friends, well-wishers and critics, to each of whom separate newsletters, however much we may desire to be able to write them, are a time-determined impossibility.)*

The life-in-community and the work-on-the-field-and the combination of the two which is probably unique to Satyodaya-continued during the three months. The General Meeting of all members held on 24 July discussed the sources of our common motivation and said this:

The organization will seek to achieve (...its) aims by seeking its motivation in a proper understanding of religion and/or in the ideals of socialist humanism.

The sentence was added as an amendment to our Statement (or Constitution). During the period Thamayanthi left Satyodaya. She had worked in our accounts office for over one year and remains a good friend of us all. Malini Mahagedera (our pre-school specialist) and Ranjit Wijesinghe (our Volkswagen driver), having completed the usual period of six-months preliminary preparation, were admitted to full membership. Satyodaya members attended Fr Mari Antony's Ordination in Nuwara Eliya in July. Mari is a Jesuit scholastic from an estate worker family and lived and worked with us at Satyodaya for one year before beginning his studies in Economics and Theology in India. He may return on a more permanent basis to Satyodaya upon completing his studies and further formation.

Our field workers continued their tasks of community organization in the various places assigned to each one of them. The Sinhala mothers from our community centre at Bahirawakande visited the very poor Tamil families at Craigingilt Estate; the interaction between Sinhala Buddhist people and Tamil Hindu families was touching, to say the least. We took our part in the National Tree Planting Week organized by the Department of Forest Conservation. A pre-school was started on Goomera Estate. The centre at Goorookelle called a women's



group meeting and discussed a programme of work. We helped to build a house in Nawalapitiya for the parents of a Sinhala soldier killed in the inter-ethnic conflict. He was the sole breadwinner of his family and our efforts proved to be a powerful step forward in the long and arduous process of national reconciliation. Those are some highlights of our work during the period.



*The Health Clinic in progress at Kap-ela as part of the Bishop Leo Memorial Health Promotion project.*

Education in the broadest sense of the creation and development of awareness is an important goal of all of our activities. To this end seminars at various levels, conferences, discussions and consultations are of great importance. During the three months 34 Seminars were held in our Seminar Hall, 19 of which were day-seminars while 15 lasted 2 or more days. 9 of the 34 Seminars were for Satyodaya groups, in 6 Satyodaya collaborated with other organizations in joint Seminars, while in 19 Seminars – for the most part conducted by officers of the Education Department, the State Plantations Corporation and the Janatha Estates Development Board for the improvement of conditions



in the plantation areas - Satyodaya provided accommodation, audiovisual facilities and the support of its own inter-ethnic character. According to the records maintained by Gordon Keegal, our Seminar Hall Administrative Officer, 896 person took part in the 34 seminars, of whom 345 were female and 551 male. Gordon warns that the figures may not be as accurate as they may seem and the true figure would, if anything be higher.

Premkumar and Siriyantha Bandara organized for a consortium of NGOs called PACT a successful Seminar on Communication, while Vasanthy and Wimalaratne were responsible for an interesting field Workshop on Library Readership at Haldola. Aloy Pieris' discussion-leads on Buddhist Humanism - in Sinhala to the Satyodaya community and in English at an Encounter for Commitment and Ulrich Donberg's talk on the Church in Contemporary Sri Lanka in the Context of the Inter-ethnic Situation need to be specially recorded.

The pigs and a part of the poultry were successfully transferred to our farm at Sarasavigama. Our farm worker member, D. M. Sunil, willingly took up residence at Sarasavigama in order to work the farm there. We enrolled two youths from Madulkelle for the training course in carpentry conducted at Kadugannawa by Fr Theodore. At the end of September we had 6 trainees at Kadugannawa and are grateful to Fr Pieris for accommodating our youths.

O. Ramachandran left for the Asian Health Institute in Nagoya, Japan for a 6 weeks course in community health organization. Satyodaya thanks AHI for his scholarship which also covered travel costs. Paul Caspersz was invited to Britain by Christian Aid for its annual Staff Consultation in London and for visits to Christian Aid Committees in Cambridge, Belfast, Glasgow, Ayr and in various cities of Lancashire. In view of our own problems in Sri Lanka, he was particularly glad of the opportunity to spend one week in Northern Ireland.



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